From Filthy Whore to Spotless Bride: 
Marriage, Infidelity, Divorce, and Reconciliation as 
Metaphor in the Latter Prophets

by

Robert L. Huffstedtler, II

An Integrative Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Reformed Theological Seminary
In Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Master of Arts (Religion) degree

April 2012
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................. 1

Scope of this Paper: Method ................................................................................................. 1

Scope of the Paper: Material ................................................................................................. 3

**Marriage: Establishment of the Covenant Relationship** ................................................. 6

Biblical Background for the Marriage Metaphor in the Prophets ...................................... 9

Appropriateness of Regarding Marriage as a Covenant ....................................................... 9

Definition of “Covenant” ........................................................................................................ 10

Edenic Pattern for Marriage ................................................................................................. 14

**Cultural Background for the Marriage Metaphor in the Latter Prophets** .................... 22

Requesting the Bride ............................................................................................................. 22

The Declaration ....................................................................................................................... 23

The Bride Price (mohar) ....................................................................................................... 24

The Contract ........................................................................................................................... 24

**Marriage Metaphor in the Latter Prophets** ..................................................................... 26

Hosea 1 .................................................................................................................................. 26

Hosea 2 .................................................................................................................................. 26

Jeremiah 2:2-3 ....................................................................................................................... 27
Ezekiel 16:8-14 .............................................................................................................. 27

Infidelity: Transgression of the Covenant Relationship ............................................. 28

Biblical Background for the Infidelity Metaphor ......................................................... 31

The Golden Calf Incident .......................................................................................... 32

Baal-Peor (Numbers 25) ............................................................................................ 33

Cultural Background for the Infidelity Metaphor ....................................................... 34

Infidelity in the Latter Prophets .................................................................................. 36

Hosea 1 ...................................................................................................................... 37

Hosea 2 ...................................................................................................................... 38

Hosea 4 ...................................................................................................................... 40

Isaiah 1:21 .................................................................................................................. 41

Isaiah 57 .................................................................................................................... 42

Jeremiah 2:18-25 ...................................................................................................... 44

Ezekiel 16:15-58 ....................................................................................................... 44

Ezekiel 23 .................................................................................................................. 45

Divorce: Dissolution of the Covenant Relationship .................................................. 47

Biblical Background for the Divorce Metaphor ......................................................... 49

Cultural Background for the Divorce Metaphor ....................................................... 50

Divorce in the Latter Prophets ................................................................................. 53
Introduction

Research in the twentieth century has greatly expanded our understanding of ancient Near Eastern covenants as critical background for understanding the Old Testament. Much of the research has focused on political covenants between suzerains and their vassals. Scholars have tended to emphasize the objective aspects of the covenant relationship (obligations and sanctions). While this political background is a valid perspective for illuminating Old Testament teaching, other Old Testament texts, particularly in the Latter Prophets, depict the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people using imagery from the domestic sphere. An exploration of Yahweh as the husband of Israel will help to illuminate the subjective aspects of God’s covenant with His people (namely, His affection for them, His righteous anger at their betrayal of the relationship, and His unflagging desire for their restoration).

There is some debate on whether marriage was properly a covenant in the Israel or the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East. I will establish that, then explore the themes of betrothal/marriage, adultery, divorce, and renewal as they are used in Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and conclude with some thoughts on how the metaphor is picked up in the New Testament and how modern readers and teachers can apply this teaching in a pastoral setting.

Scope of this Paper: Method

Much of the research on the prophets in the last two centuries has begun with the assumptions of form criticism. This is most notably the case with Isaiah, but critical method is also has a strong influence in research concerning Hosea and Malachi. For this thesis, our
interest is in the text in its final canonical form. I will not be exploring any exegetical arguments that depend on a speculative diachronic development of the text.

These passages in the Latter Prophets with their feminine depiction of Israel/Judah have naturally attracted the attention of feminist scholars. Some of these scholars have provided interesting and useful perspective on the passages. Sadly, many operate from such a thorough basis of reader-response criticism that their work ends up telling us more about them than it does about the text.

As an example of this, consider Teresa Hornsby’s treatment of Hosea. Hornsby recasts Gomer as the heroine. She describes Gomer as “a prosperous and independent prostitute who is doggedly pursued by an obsessive and dangerous individual who will go to any length to possess her.” Hornsby’s interpretation relies on her insistence that harlotry (**זְנוּנִים**), is defined exclusively by economic interchange, that “taking” and “loving” are not synonyms for marriage, and an unsupported assumption that the book originated in the Persian period as a protest against immigrant priests and reformers (presumably those who returned with Ezra). There are more responsible feminist scholars who raise interesting points and remind those of us who are male readers and scholars that our reading is influenced by our male experience. An adequate interaction with their points is beyond the scope of this work. For an introductory step in that direction, I direct the reader to Ray Ortlund’s “The Harlot Metaphor and Feminist Interpretation” which is the appendix to his excellent work *God’s Unfaithful Wife*.

---

2 Hornsby, 119.
3 Hornsby, 127.
Scope of the Paper: Material

This paper will deal primarily with the themes of marriage, infidelity, divorce, and reconciliation as they are developed in the Latter Prophets. I will focus on those passages which explore the themes most explicitly: Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 1; 50; 54; 57; Jeremiah 2; 3; 13; and Ezekiel 16; 23. I take the point of view that the divorce in Malachi 2 is literal rather than figurative. For this reason, it is omitted from our current discussion. Other passages from the latter prophets will be referenced where they introduce a unique perspective. Some discussion of passages in the Pentateuch will be necessary to establish the theological and literary background for the prophetic material. In a paper of this size, it is impractical to treat all of the passages in depth. Those readers desiring a deeper study are encouraged to consult Richard M. Davidson’s encyclopedic work on the topic of sexuality in the Old Testament, Flame of Yahweh.

For our purposes, I am assuming the validity of the traditional dating of the Old Testament documents. That assumption is significant in that it contextualizes the writing prophets as men who were aware of the Pentateuch and large portions of the Writings. The message given by God through them is intended to be read in that context and represents a progressive development of what had already been revealed rather than a reaction against it.

Although I accept the traditional dating, I take no position on how quickly the earliest prophetic writings reached their final redacted form or how broadly they circulated. Consequently, it does not seem wise to draw any conclusions about how consciously the human writers of scripture advanced the metaphor. Rather, I will assume that while operating within the confines of the metaphor, each prophet had a great degree of freedom to emphasize the elements of the metaphor that were central to the message he was charged
with delivering in his particular time and place. Practically, this means that I am not overly concerned with differences such as Jeremiah presenting Yahweh’s relationship with Israel in the wilderness in an idealized manner (Jer. 2:2-3) while Ezekiel chooses to emphasize that infidelity was nascent in Israel even during her sojourn in Egypt. (Ezek. 23:8) Similarly, within each book the order in which the passages occur in the canonical text does not always reflect the order in which they were authored. This is most clearly the case in books like Jeremiah that provide explicit dating, but it is widely assumed that the first chapters of Hosea and Isaiah were placed as introductions after the rest of the book was collated.

Although I am structuring the study of the marriage metaphor in terms of the chronology of the metaphorical relationship, one finds that this is not the order in which the metaphor was historically developed by the Latter Prophets. Instead, the point of initial encounter is Israel’s infidelity. This is due to the circumstances in which the prophets were speaking and writing.

Hosea and Amos were among the earliest of the writing prophets. Both delivered messages that primarily concerned the Northern Kingdom. Their ministries corresponded to a time of expansion in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Their territorial rivals were weak or preoccupied and the two nations enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity. Rather than turning to Yahweh in gratitude, they increased in idolatry and oppression. Similarly, Israel increased her ties with surrounding pagan nations.

Idolatry was rampant in the Northern Kingdom. Despite Elijah’s victory over the prophets of Baal recorded in 1 Kgs. 18, and Jehu’s subsequent extermination of the priests of Baal (2 Kgs. 10), Hosea’s frequent references to the Baals suggest a continuing presence of
Canaanite religion some 100 to 150 years later. Moreover, although Jehu was zealous in eradicating Baal worship, he “did not turn aside from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat... that is the golden calves that were in Dan and Bethel.” (2 Kgs. 10:29) It is apparent that the religion of Northern Israel at the time was a mixture of Yahwism, Baalism, and practices imported from Israel’s pagan neighbors. Further, prophetic complaints against rampant sexual immorality, violence, and injustice to the poor are contextualized as sins against the unique relationship that Israel enjoyed with God. (Amos 3:1; Hos. 4:2; etc.)

Isaiah, ministering at roughly the same time as Hosea, and Micah, who began prophesying late in the period of Hosea’s ministry, also begin by thundering against idolatry and oppression, but they include Judah in their warnings. They do not use the infidelity metaphor as extensively, but it is present.

In reaction to this infidelity, Hosea depicts either a divorce or a threat of divorce. Isaiah is the first to make reference to a certificate of divorce (Is. 50). By the time of Jeremiah, approximately 100 years later, Israel had been sent into exile. Yahweh speaks of the divorce with Israel as an accomplished fact (Jer. 3:8), which should warn her sister Judah away from committing the same kinds of infidelity.

Once divorce has entered the picture, there is a question of how Yahweh and Israel can be reconciled so that His purposes will stand. All of the prophets who treat the subject of reconciliation within the framework of the marriage metaphor are insistent that Yahweh must initiate the action, and that what is necessary is a completely new marriage founded on better promises. This is most clearly depicted in Hosea’s rescue of Gomer (Hos. 3), but it finds expression in Isaiah 62 and Ezekiel 16 as well.
The prophets necessarily view Yahweh’s initial betrothal and marriage to Israel retrospectively. None of the prophets deals with the initiation of the relationship in detail. Rather, they accept it as a basic fact within which they can operate and keep their references to brief allusions (Hos. 2:14-15; Ezek. 16:8-14).

**Marriage: Establishment of the Covenant Relationship**

Betrothal and marriage are frequently referred to throughout the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Given the frequency with which marriage is mentioned, it is surprising that we know little about the day to day details of marriage in Israel. From the narrative portions of the Old Testament, we see a great degree of diversity in marriage patterns. A few brief examples will illustrate this diversity:

- The marriage between Adam and Eve was instituted by God Himself. (Gen. 2)
- Lamech entered into the first recorded instance of polygamy. (Gen. 4)
- Abraham married his half-sister, which would later be a prohibited relationship. (Gen. 20)
- Abraham took some number of concubines. (Gen. 25)
- Abraham and Sarah sent a servant to procure a bride for Isaac. (Gen. 24)
- Jacob negotiated his own marriage to Rachel (and was tricked into marriage with Leah). (Gen. 29)
- Ruth took the initiative in wooing Boaz. (Ruth 2-3)
- David received Michal as a reward for his acts of bravery. (1 Sam. 18:17-30)
• David proposed to the widow Abigail and married her during his period of exile while already having several wives. (1 Sam. 25:2-42)

We have some extrabiblical data regarding marriage among the Hebrews. From Elephantine, a Jewish military colony in Egypt, we have a collection of papyri that includes marriage contracts dating from around 400BC. Similarly, documents concerning marriage and divorce were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. There are two limitations to the value of these documents: 1) they focus on the contractual aspects of marriage rather than the day to day experience of marriage, and 2) they come from time periods where Israel had experienced considerable foreign influence.

Perhaps more useful for understanding marriage in the context of ordinary life is the apocryphal book of Tobit. The book is about a Jewish family from the tribe of Napthali living in exile in Assyria. The bulk of the book is dedicated to a journey to Media undertaken by the titular character’s son Tobias to collect a sum of money which had been left in trust with the Tobit’s kinsman Raguel. In the process, Tobit meets and marries Raguel’s daughter Sarah.

Tobit deals extensively with family matters, but it depicts a family pattern far different from the Western nuclear family. It is an interconnected, intergenerational system that is defined by affinity based on descent from a common ancestor and by a series of interconnected and sometimes clashing obligations to each other (for example, the couple Tobias and Sara have the difficulty of obligations to care for their parents in their old age when the parents live
in different cities). Although Tobit offers a better glimpse into day to day life, it shares the limitation of being late in date and influenced by foreign sources\(^4\).

We have a broader set of data from other cultures in the ancient Near East. The law codes of other ancient Near Eastern cultures provide insight into their practices regarding betrothal, marriage contracts, adultery, divorce, and other family issues. Ancient Israel, even in its times of greatest faithfulness, was a part of the same cultural milieu. David Instone-Brewer articulates a helpful guiding principle for using other ancient Near Eastern law codes as a hermeneutical aid:

“We must assume that where the Old Testament is silent, there was broad agreement with the prevailing culture. However, the Israelites were very proud that they did not conform to the prevailing culture of the nations surrounding them. We can therefore assume that when there was a distinctiveness between the Israelites and their neighbors, this would be likely to be recorded in the Pentateuch\(^5\).”

Given the small amount of detail recorded in Scripture, the diversity in the marriages we do know about, and the likelihood that there were developments in practice over time, we should not assume that the precise details of marriage in Israel/Judah are crucial for the prophetic use of marriage as a metaphor. Rather, it will be more useful to assume that the prophets chose marriage because of its essential characteristics that were stable over time.

---


There is solid evidence that Tobit is a derivative of an earlier Syrian story which was later adapted to Jewish sensibilities in a manner similar to the Christianization of the Beowulf epic.

\(^5\) David Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 21.
Biblical Background for the Marriage Metaphor in the Prophets

According to Gordon Hugenberger, the analogy of a god and his people as husband and wife is “unattested outside the Bible.” Davidson goes farther than this, stating that not only is the analogy not used in other ANE literature, but the very notion of a god being in covenant relationship with a people is unique to Israel.

Appropriateness of Regarding Marriage as a Covenant

Prior to the latter prophets, there is no unambiguous instance in Scripture where marriage is described as a covenant. Proverbs 2 contains an extended entreaty to value wisdom addressed from a father to his son. Among the benefits of pursuing wisdom is delivery from the adulteress: “So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God.” (Prov. 2:16-17) Some have argued on the basis of the parallelism between 17a and 17b that “the covenant of her God” is a reference to her marriage vows. Alternatively, it may be a more general reference to obedience to God.

However, the description of marriage as a covenant in Ezek. 16 and Mal. 2 is not innovative. An examination of the concept of covenant in the bible and what we know of

---

Schmitt is quite outside the scholarly mainstream with this point of view, and he supports it with some strange exegetical positions. For instance, he insists that the masculine nature of Israel is in view in Ezek. 16 because the wives of God are cities (Samaria and Jerusalem) rather than nations (Israel and Judah). It is far more natural to regard the references to Samaria and Jerusalem as synecdoche that encompasses their respective nations.

marriage in Scripture and ancient Near Eastern culture shows a consistent covenantal understanding even in the absence of explicit use of the term covenant⁸.

**Definition of “Covenant”**

The English word “covenant” is the consistent translation of the Hebrew ברית. Etymological studies of the word have shed little light on its meaning. Thankfully, the term is used extensively in the Hebrew Bible (at least 284 occurrences), so its contextual usage illuminates its meaning quite well. A covenant established a relationship of obligation between individuals or nations. A covenant could be formed between equals (for example, the covenant between Abraham and the Amorites in Gen. 14:13) or between a superior and an inferior party (for example, the covenant between Israel and the Gibeonites in Josh. 9).

**Covenantal Structure**

There is great diversity in the detail included in the descriptions of the various covenants formed in Old Testament narrative. Consequently, a variety of schemes have been proposed for describing the structure of the covenant itself. The seven part structure given in the Holman Bible Handbook is typical: Title, Prologue, Stipulations, Provisions for Deposition and Reading, Witnesses, Blessing and Curses (often called sanctions in other schemes), and Oath Ceremony Sanctions⁹. Other schemes label, order, group, or divide those basic principles differently (often dependent upon a specific external covenant model such as Hittite or Assyrian political covenants). Ray Sutton provides a five element model that consists of: 1) a basis in ultimate transcendent reality (God), 2) the presence of an administrative hierarchy, 3) ethics (the specific

---

⁸Davidson, 378.
obligations of the covenant), 4) the sanctions of the covenant (typically secured by an oath to God), and 5) continuity (means of renewing the covenant)\textsuperscript{10}. Regardless of specific structure, most models generally contain the same core concepts. Gordon Hugenberger summarizes those concepts by describing a covenant as “an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath\textsuperscript{11}.”

The effect of a covenant was to apply the natural unity of family relationship outside the bounds of blood. An excessive focus on the details of obligations and sanctions tends to mute the elements of affection and familial connection. Numerous explicit examples can be shown from Scripture. In the interest of space, I offer three. In Exodus 19:5, Yahweh extends the promise “if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession\textsuperscript{12}.” Although the image is one of property, it is property for which the owner has a special affection\textsuperscript{13}. This is further illuminated by other references in the Torah which make it clear that Yahweh views Israel as an adopted son\textsuperscript{14}. This forms the basis both of Yahweh’s redemptive action on behalf of his people (Deut. 32:9-12) and His requirement that Israel walk in holiness (Deut. 14:1).

The relationship between Jonathan and David provides a purely human example. Jonathan entered into covenant with David “because he loved him as his own soul.” (1 Sam. 18:3) The details of their covenantal obligations are not revealed in the text, but the actions that flow out of their covenant are consistent with a general disposition of affection rather than

\textsuperscript{10}Ray Sutton, \textit{That You May Prosper} (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1987), 119-122.
\textsuperscript{11}Hugenberger, 11.
\textsuperscript{14}A very profitable study of the covenantal significance of adoption could also be performed, but to do so is outside the scope of this paper.
rigid adherence to a specifically detailed list of obligations. For instance, there is Jonathan’s repeated intercession on David’s behalf in the face of Saul’s anger, his assistance in David’s escape plot, David’s mourning over Jonathan’s death (in which he describes Jonathan as his brother), and David’s caretaking with regard to Mephibosheth because he was Jonathan’s son.

One more example from the life of David will suffice. There is a general scholarly consensus that 2 Samuel 7 records the establishment of a covenant between Yahweh and David. The occasion for this is David’s seeking to build a “house” (i.e., the Temple) for Yahweh. Yahweh reverses David’s intent and declares that He will first build a “house” (i.e., an enduring political dynasty) for David. The nature of this political dynasty has religious and covenantal significance, because Yahweh declares concerning David’s offspring: “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. I will not take my steadfast love from him.” (1 Chr. 17:13)

**Covenantal Ratification**

Scriptural detail concerning the actual process of instituting a covenant is similarly diverse. Covenant ratifications in scripture at times included an explicit oath, an enacted sign, the presence of witnesses, a written record of the details of the covenant, a meal, giving of gifts, and/or the institution of a permanent sign for the covenant. Where one or more of these is not included, it is difficult to determine whether

1. the author merely did not record its presence,
2. the element was incidental rather than essential to the ratification, or
3. another element could be substituted for the “missing” element and serve the same purpose.
According to Hugenberger, there is a widespread scholarly consensus that the presence of an oath is indispensable for ratifying a covenant\textsuperscript{15}. The greatest difficulty in arguing that a covenantal understanding of marriage is appropriate is that the majority of recorded marriages in the Old Testament, both literal and metaphorical, do not have an unambiguous oath. However, it is clear from the example of other covenants that the oath could be communicated by an “oath sign” rather than by verbalization.

As an example of this, consider 1 Sam. 18:3-4.

\textsuperscript{3}Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

\textsuperscript{4}And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt.

The passage is explicit in recording the establishment of a covenant, but no oath is mentioned. However, Jonathan’s clothing of David in his own robe and investing him with his weapons and armor serves to communicate the bond of fealty just as well\textsuperscript{16}.

Secondly, it must be noted that there are numerous instances in Scripture where later texts reference an oath that is not explicitly recorded in an earlier narrative. For instance, in 2 Sam 3:9, Abner references an oath Yahweh’s oath to David to transfer the kingdom from Saul to him. There is no record of a verbal oath to such an effect. One could possibly argue that Samuel’s anointing of David is functions as an oath sign to the same effect.

Extrabiblical evidence points toward several candidates for oath signs within the Israelite marriage ceremony. These will be discussed in the context of the cultural background

\textsuperscript{15}Hugenberger, 182.

\textsuperscript{16}One could see the gifts as an incidental detail to the covenant, intended solely to demonstrate and foster amity between the two men. However, given that Jonathan is giving him his own possessions, and possessions that pertained to his role as prince, it seems more likely to me that the giving of gifts in this instance is elevated to the level of a sign. See Hugenberger, 198 for similar examples.
for the marriage metaphor. Within the bible, a strong case can be made for seeing sexual union as a ratifying oath sign. One of the strongest considerations in favor of this is that in situations of premarital sex, all that was necessary to formalize the union was to pay the bride price\textsuperscript{17}.

Davidson argues that the Edenic marriage account does include a ratifying oath. There is a common notion that Adam’s utterance upon meeting Eve, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23) is merely an expression of his exuberance at finally meeting the creature that had been designed as his perfect counterpart. While it surely includes that, we find the same phrase used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to signify a bonding of covenant loyalty even when the physical relationship might be quite distant (Gen. 29:14; Jdg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 2 Sam. 19:12-13).

**Edenic Pattern for Marriage**

The early chapters of Genesis devote a seemingly disproportionate amount of space to matters of sexuality and reproduction. According to Richard Davidson, there is a growing scholarly consensus that it is proper to use Genesis 1-3 as an “interpretive foundation” for the remainder of the Hebrew Bible’s teaching on and use of marriage and sexuality\textsuperscript{18}. We find that exact hermeneutical method used in the New Testament, where Jesus, Paul, and Peter all make reference to the Genesis narrative in their discussions of marriage topics.

The Genesis account of creation differs from contemporary pagan creation myths in a number of ways, but two are relevant for our discussion. First, sexual differentiation is something that belongs to the created order. Although masculine pronouns are used for God in

\[\text{\textsuperscript{17}Hugenberger, 279.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}Davidson, 15.}\]
both the first and second chapter of Genesis, sexuality is not an inherent characteristic of the
divine nature. This is a significant contrast to the creation myths of Egypt and Mesopotamia
with their sexually differentiated pantheons whose sexual interactions frequently play a crucial
role in the process of creation. As with much else in the creation narrative, there is likely an
intentional polemic against Canaanite religion\(^\text{19}\).

Genesis 2 gives an explicit rationale for the creation of a female counterpart to Adam:
“It is not good that the man should be alone.” (Gen 2:18) In common English usage, “alone” has
tends to have a negative emotional connotation. As a consequence, readers tend initially to
approach this verse with the assumption that Adam was in danger of feeling lonely, and that
this is the problem God was seeking to solve. However, Genesis tells us nothing of Adam’s own
perception of his situation. “Not good” is God’s assessment, not Adam’s. Given the absence of
sin and his experience of direct fellowship with God, it seems unlikely that Adam had an
unresolved social need. Rather, it seems best to approach the rationale from God’s perspective.

God had placed Adam in the garden “to work it and keep it.” (Gen 2:15) Without a helper,
Adam was insufficient to the task. Moreover, the intent for mankind to multiply and fill the
earth could not be accomplished without a procreative partner.

In any case, this is an area where the metaphor must not be pressed too far. The
rationale for the institution of marriage informs our understanding of marriage in its actual
practice among men and women, but there does not seem to be a metaphorical counterpart to
the rationale. In taking a people to Himself, God was neither trying to fill a social void nor
increase His capability for performing His work.

\(^{19}\)Davidson, 18.
The earliest accounts of God electing a person, such as His choosing of Abraham to be the father of His chosen people (Gen 12, 17) do not give God’s rationale for His choice. In Deuteronomy 4, Moses makes it clear that the rationale for God’s choice of Israel as a nation was nothing in the people, but it was because of His love for them and his faithfulness to His earlier covenant promises. Given the stress laid on God’s self-sufficiency throughout Scripture, it seems safest to assume that the marriage metaphor does not point towards any need on God’s part to choose a people for Himself.

Within Genesis 1-2, Davidson identifies ten facets for a theology of human sexuality. Of these, four have direct value for the metaphor of marriage as applied to God and His people: monogamy, exclusivity, permanence, and intimacy. Each of these is presented in Gen. 2:24: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”

**Monogamy**

Monogamy is inherent in the creation account. The nouns and pronouns relating to the man and woman are all singular. God makes “a helper” for the man. The reflection in v.24 establishes that “a man” shall take “his wife” and they shall become “one flesh”. Polygamy is implicitly excluded. Indeed, when it does appear in chapter 4, it is one of the defining characteristics of Lamech, the seventh in the line of Cain, who was as paradigmatic of that line’s iniquity as Enoch, the seventh from Seth, was of the faithfulness of the Sethite line.

Polygamy was broadly accepted in ancient Near Eastern culture. Assyrian law allowed a man to have one full or “veiled” wife, but he could take as many free-born concubines as he

---

20 Davidson, 15-53.
wished. In the event that the veiled wife did not produce offspring, the sons of his concubines became his heirs\textsuperscript{21}. Similarly, Canaanite society was polygamous. From the historical books we know that polygamy did occur among the patriarchs and within national Israel.

The Law does not directly forbid polygamy, except in the case of kings. It makes accommodation for polygamy as an existing cultural institution and attempts to safeguard the rights of the first wife. For instance, Exod. 21:10 forbids the husband from reducing the sustenance due to a first wife in the instance where a husband takes a second wife.

In keeping with Instone-Brewer’s principle above, it might seem that we should regard this regulation as implicit approval of the practice. However, the frankness with which the Hebrew Bible deals with the problems that arise from polygamy (for instance, jealousy between the wives and rivalries among the potential heirs) weigh against this. Rather, it seems that the prohibition is directed to kings because of their role as national representative and because their wealth and the pressures to form alliances with their neighbors exposed them to the temptation of polygamy more so than an ordinary Israelite.

Some interpreters argue that Ezek. 23 proves divine approbation of polygamy. That chapter contains a lengthy metaphor depicting Yahweh’s marriage to two sisters, Oholah (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem). To see the chapter as an approval of polygamy ignores the fact that the prophet is bending the metaphor to account for the historical particularities of the situation of the divided kingdom\textsuperscript{22}. Indeed, the situation of marrying two sisters is one which was explicitly forbidden in the list of unlawful sexual relations in Leviticus 18.

\textsuperscript{22} Davidson, 208.
The Old Testament contains at least 40 references to the institution of concubinage in Israel and in surrounding cultures. Both Abraham and his brother Nahor had concubines. (Gen 25:6; Gen. 22:24) The institution existed in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. A concubine (שׁפִילֶגֶפִּ) was a true wife (as opposed to a mistress), although of lower standing than a full wife. The relationship could be voluntary (as appears to be the case with the Levite and his concubine in Judges 20), or a concubine could be purchased from slavery (Exod. 21:7-11) or acquired as the spoils of war (Num. 31:18). In any of the above cases, the concubine was afforded some legal protection against the husband arbitrarily reducing her physical support or conjugal rights. (Exod. 21:7-11)

Concubinage is essentially an offshoot of polygamy, although there are cases like the Levite in Judges 20, where no primary wife is mentioned. Although regulated by the Torah, it is a corruption of God’s intended pattern for marriage. There are no examples in Scripture of God entering into a relationship of concubinage, so the topic will not be further considered in this paper.

*Exclusivity*

Marriage in the creation account was intended to be exclusive. The husband was to leave his parents. At times, leaving may have involved a literal physical transition of residence, but it is clear from other biblical narratives that at times, the new couple would share the dwelling of an extended family that was overseen by the groom’s father. The latter is typical of

---


the normal form of marriage in the ancient Near East, where the woman joined the household of her husband.\textsuperscript{25}

The semantic range of “leave” (עָזַב) in both English and Hebrew encompasses both physical departure and removal of loyalty.\textsuperscript{26} The latter meaning has covenantal significance and is common in the Hebrew Bible. It is used of Israel’s apostasy from Yahweh in texts such as Deut. 28:20, 31:16, Jer. 1:16, and Hos. 4:10. The principle meaning of the term in Gen. 2:24 is a change in covenant loyalty. One’s primary earthly loyalty shifts from the family of origin (“a man will leave his father and mother”) to the new family (“and be united to his wife”). This change is demonstrated in Numbers 30, where Moses specifies that a maiden’s vow may be nullified by her father, but a married woman’s vow may only be nullified by her husband.

\textit{Permanence}

The intended permanence of the marriage bond is signified by the man’s “holding fast” (דָבַק) to his wife. The Hebrew word \textit{dābaq} signifies strong attachment. The physical dimensions of the word include the clinging of parts of the body to each other (as in Job 19:20). It can also signify strong affection and loyalty, as in the case of Ruth’s devotion to Naomi (Ruth 1:14). It is used in numerous places for Israel’s covenant fidelity (Deut. 10:20; 11:22; 13:4; Josh. 22:5; etc.).

The sense of Gen 2:24 is that the marriage is to be a permanent, intentional bond. The permanence, however, is not “one of ontological indissolubility, as some have inferred from this phrase, thereby concluding that the bond can never be dissolved except by death, even in a...\textsuperscript{25} Mendelsohn, 25.
context of a spouse’s marital unfaithfulness. By comparison with the larger covenantal usage of the term, it is clear that while God intended his covenant with Israel to be permanent, Israel historically disrupted the covenant through persistent, repeated unfaithfulness.

**Intimacy**

The final clause of Gen. 2:24 establishes that the man and his wife “shall become one flesh.” The physical intimacy of sexual union is clearly in view, but the intimacy is not limited to that. It “indicates a oneness and intimacy in the total relationship of the whole person of the husband to the whole person of the wife, a harmony and union with each other in all things.” We find confirmation of this in the transparency illustrated by the fact that “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” (Gen. 2:25) Similarly, the common Hebrew idiom for sexual intercourse “to know” (יָדַע) expresses at least the possibility of an intimacy that extends beyond the physical encounter. Rather than seeing it as a euphemism that communicates less than what is truly happening, we should perhaps see it as a pointer to the fact that more is going on than is visible to the eye.

Davidson suggests that the one flesh union implicitly establishes the rationale for forbidding relationships where there was already an existing bond of blood. Davidson argues for an implicit prohibition of mother-son and father-daughter unions (based on the command to leave father and mother) at a minimum and possibly any intergenerational union. Against the hypothetical prohibition of intergenerational family unions, we have the example of Moses’s mother and father, who were nephew and aunt. (Exod. 6:20) Clearly, the earliest

---

27 Davidson, 46.
28 Davidson, 47.
29 ibid.
families must have been formed from pairs of brothers and sisters. Even by the time of the patriarchs, we find Abram marrying his half-sister (Gen. 20:12), but as revelation progresses, a detailed list of forbidden relationships is provided in the Levitical code.

In dealing with the prohibition against remarriage of a divorced couple following an intermediate marriage to another party, Gordon Wenham offered the theory that the one flesh union of the original marriage places the husband and wife in a relationship that is as close as any of those forbidden under the incest laws. When the divorce occurs, this closeness of relationship is unchanged, creating the paradoxical effect that the two are now too closely related to enter into marriage.30

This element of intimacy is precisely the reason that marriage works so well as a metaphor for the relationship between Yahweh and his people. While metaphors such as Yahweh as king or Yahweh as a potter provide a sense of the disparity in rights and glory between Yahweh and His people, they minimize the emotional content of the metaphor. “The marriage metaphor, unlike other metaphors for hierarchical, asymmetric relationships, clearly evoked images of intimacy... This attribute of the metaphor allowed also for the development on an enhanced sense of jealousy and a corresponding expectation for heavy punishment.”31

This notion of jealousy (and Israel’s corresponding harlotry) is developed extensively in the Pentateuch prior to the marriage analogy becoming explicit. Davidson argues that this “divine sentiment of jealousy/zeal is the supreme marital emotion within the covenant bond.”32 In modern American English, “jealousy” has a strongly negative connotation. It is used almost

---

30 Kaiser, 203.
31 Ben Zvi, 376.
exclusively as a precise synonym for envy. From the perspective of faithless Israel, there was
certainly a dark side to Yahweh’s jealousy. His jealousy was the motivation for the punishments
that he brought on the nation in response to her faithlessness.

However, there is an equally strong positive side. Yahweh’s jealousy drove Him toward
anger at her oppressors. (Zech. 1:14-17) As such, it was the motivation for Him to pour out
wrath upon those enemies, to reestablish Jerusalem, and to dwell with her. (Ezek. 36:6-7; Ezek.
39:25; Nah. 1:2; Zech. 8:2-3)

Cultural Background for the Marriage Metaphor in the Latter Prophets

John Collins identifies four steps in a marriage revealed in the Elephantine documents:
(1) the groom requests the bride from her father; (2) he declares solemnly, “She is my wife and
I am her husband.” The formula typically concludes with the words “from this day and forever”;
(3) he pays a mohar or “bride-price” to the father; (4) the contract is drawn up.

Requesting the Bride

Other texts make it clear that the groom could make the request through an agent (as
was the case in the negotiation of Isaac’s marriage). In the book of Tobit, the titular character’s
son Tobias is staying with his kinsman Raguel in Ecbatana. Tobias asks his traveling companion,
the angel Raphael (who was posing as his cousin Azariah) to request Raguel to give him Raguel’s
daughter Sarah in marriage. Raguel overhears the conversation and immediately begins
working out the details of the marriage with Tobias.

33John J. Collins, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism," In Families in Ancient Israel,
There is nothing corresponding to this in the analogy between Yahweh and Israel. That is likely due to the fact that there was no one whose permission Yahweh could legitimately be imagined as having to ask. Rather, Ezekiel presents Jerusalem as the offspring of an Amorite and a Hittite who had been abandoned as an infant. (Ezek. 16:2-6)

**The Declaration**

“You are my wife” and “You are my husband” are widely regarded as the form of declaration that effected the marriage through a solemn oath (*verbasolemnia*). Attestation for this precise verbiage prior to the Elephantine contracts is somewhat weak, but it is generally inferred from the formulas for adoption and divorce and from similar practice in ANE cultures\(^\text{34}\).

In Tobit, the marriage ceremony is a private and hastily organized affair (due in part to Raguel’s desire to keep the whole matter secret in the event that Tobias is slain by the same demon who has killed each of Sarah’s seven earlier husbands on her wedding nights prior to the consummation of the marriage). The only witnesses are Azariah and Raguel himself\(^\text{35}\).

Raguel conducts the ceremony, which seems remarkably brief and consists primarily of his (rather than the couple’s) pronouncement of *verbasolemnia* that follow a slightly different pattern: “Take your kinswoman; from now on you are her brother and she is your sister. She is given to you from today and forever. May the Lord of heaven, my child, guide and prosper you both this night and grant you mercy and peace.” (Tob. 7:11) Remarkably, Sarah is not present for this part of the ceremony, suggesting that it may more properly be considered the betrothal. Raguel immediately calls her in and makes a further pronouncement: “Take her to be

\(^{34}\)Hugenberger, 219.

\(^{35}\) The story gives the distinct impression that Raguel’s wife Edna was busy in the kitchen or elsewhere while he is conducting the negotiations and the impromptu ceremony.
your wife in accordance with the law and decree written in the book of Moses. Take her and bring her safely to your father.” (Tob. 7:12)

**The Bride Price (mohar)**

The term מֹהַר occurs only three times in Scripture (Gen. 34:12; Exod. 22:16; 1 Sam. 18:25). It is commonly translated “bride price”, which suggests that the woman was regarded as chattel. While “purchase-marriage” may have been the original practice, it is clear that at least in later times, the mohar functioned more as form of insurance for the bride in the instance that her husband should die or desert her. The Elephantine contracts placed the payment of the bride price after the solemnization of the marriage, but earlier practice in the ANE placed the payment at the time of betrothal.\(^\text{36}\). In Tobit, no mohar is mentioned. This is possibly reflective of later developments where the mohar was not actually paid unless there was a breach of the marriage contract.\(^\text{37}\).

**The Contract**

Scholars disagree about the usage of formal marriage contracts in pre-exilic Israel. Instone-Brewer suggests that most marriages probably did not have a written contract. There was a body of understood stipulations in marriage. Written contracts were only necessary when the dowry was large or there were unusual stipulations.\(^\text{38}\). By contrast, the code of Hammurabi and the Laws of Eshnunna mandated that the validity of the marriage was dependent on the

---

\(^\text{36}\) Collins, 114.

It is quite likely that the rationale for the law requiring the payment of the mohar in the instance of a man seducing a virgin (Exod. 22:16) was to protect the woman from being devalued as a marriage partner. One can easily imagine a situation, absent such a law, where a man would seduce a woman and use her lack of virginity to reduce his payment to her family if he did choose to marry her.

\(^\text{37}\) ibid.

\(^\text{38}\) Instone-Brewer, 8.
presence of a formal contract. Standard ANE marriage contracts regularly stipulated that the husband was obligated to provide maintenance for his wife in the form of food, clothing, and anointing oil. Significantly, these are precisely the obligations of Exodus 21:10 and are closely related to what Gomer seeks from her lovers in Hos. 2:7. In Tobit, the wedding contract is drawn up immediately following the solemnization of the marriage and prior to the family eating together. No details of the contract are recorded.

It is frequently posited that marriage in the OT was primarily a contractual affair. Blenkinsopp’s summary of the biblical data is typical: “The pragmatic, contractual view of marriage is typical of ancient Israel and Judah and, indeed, of the entire ancient Near East.” If the only data one had available about contemporary Western marriages were prenuptial agreements, divorce settlements, and legal codes concerning marriage, one might draw the conclusion that our culture had a pragmatic view. On the other hand, if one had no data other than love songs and poetry used in weddings, one might draw an entirely different conclusion.

While it can be theologically and pastorally useful to distinguish between the underlying covenantal framework of the relationship itself and the contractual details surrounding the marriage, we must be aware that this distinction postdates the biblical documents. The ancient Near Eastern concept of covenant was inclusive of commercial contracts. Even within the elevated concept of covenant we must be careful that in an attempt to emphasize the subjective aspects of the relationship, we do not strip the covenant of its external stipulations so that it becomes nothing but an emotional state that is not reflected in daily living.

---

40 Davidson, 380.
42 Instone-Brewer, 2.
Marriage Metaphor in the Latter Prophets

Having described the basic structure of marriage, let us consider some passages from the Latter Prophets where the analogy is used.

Hosea 1

Hosea is the first to apply the metaphor of marriage and divorce to the relationship between Israel and God explicitly. In Hosea’s case the metaphor is enacted in his own life. It is sometimes suggested that the marriage was purely allegorical rather than historical, but there is nothing in the text that would seem to support this. The language is the standard language of taking (فاقض) a wife, and neither Gomer’s name nor her father seems to have any particular symbolic meaning. I will discuss Gomer’s character in the section on infidelity.

Hosea 2

Although Hosea 2 begins with the threat of divorce, it provides the promise of a new marriage. I will explore this further in the section on reconciliation, but it is worth noting here because it includes the specific promise of a betrothal.

19 And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. 20 I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD. (Hos. 2:19-20)

A betrothal was a pledge to marry, which in the earlier phases of Israel’s history included the financial exchange of the mohar. In Hosea 2, Yahweh makes payment for his bride. The recipient is unspecified, because in reality there is no party who can make a legitimate claim on Israel. The payment is more valuable than any financial gift. It consists of precisely those virtues that will be necessary for Israel to meet her covenant obligations in the future.
Jeremiah 2:2-3

The first proclamation in the book of Jeremiah is not dated. Based on its content, it is clearly to be dated prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. It was to be delivered in the hearing of Jerusalem. While this might at first give credence to Schmitt’s position that Israel is always described in masculine/son terms, and that feminine/wife terms are only used of cities, it is clear that Jerusalem did not follow Yahweh in the wilderness. It is more sensible to see Jerusalem as standing in for Yahweh’s entire people in these verses. Throughout the remainder of the chapter, the prophet shifts the gender of his second person pronouns, sometimes in mid-sentence, as he shifts from one metaphor to another.

In this passage, the marriage metaphor is quite explicit. Israel is the “bride” of Yahweh. Moreover, in Jeremiah’s treatment, the early days of the relationship were characterized by devotion (חוה) on her part. Similarly, Yahweh met his obligations by protecting her (Jer. 3:3b) and providing for her. (Jer. 3:7a)

Ezekiel 16:8-14

Ezekiel 16 is an extended metaphor for the entire relationship of Yahweh and His people. The first verses recount His finding her as an abandoned baby and rescuing her. Some years later, He passes by again and discovers that she has grown into a beautiful young woman of marriageable age. These verses likely describe the marriage ritual itself. Using available ANE background data including the biblical documents, Daniel Block infers that the following elements were generally present in the marriage ceremony:

(1) the groom covers the bride with his garment, symbolizing his intent to protect and provide for her in the new relationship (cf. Ruth 3:9); (2) the groom (and, I would add, likely also
the bride) swears an oath of fidelity... (3) the groom (and, I would add, likely also the bride) enters into the marriage contract with verbasolemnia; (4) the bride is bathed by the groom and anointed with oil by him... (5) the bride is dressed by the groom in the finest clothing and ornaments he can afford (cf. Ps 45; Is. 61:10); and (6) a sumptuous feast provided by the groom ensues at the groom’s house.

It is perhaps significant that this passage does not record any response on the part of the bride. She enjoys the gifts of clothing, ornaments, and food provided by the husband. Her beauty grows and she becomes a queen, widely known for her perfect beauty, but there is no indication of faithfulness on her part.

This passage is also noteworthy for directly describing the marriage as a covenant. M. Greenberg and other scholars reject this identification, arguing that the underlying historical reality of God’s dealing with his people is intruding into the metaphor at this point. Greenberg’s argument falls short on several counts. The greatest difficulty it faces is that aside from this and three other alleged intrusions (which are equally doubtful) Ezekiel maintains the metaphor with remarkable consistency and detail throughout the entire passage.

Infidelity: Transgression of the Covenant Relationship

In contrast to the expectation of steadfast covenant loyalty, Israel quickly and repeatedly proved herself to be faithless. The most frequently used words for faithlessness come from the root בָּגָדָה, which signifies treachery and can be applied to a number of different

---

41Davidson, 382.
44Hugenberger, 307.
relationships, including marriage\textsuperscript{45}. However, the Hebrew Bible depicts Israel’s infidelity using metaphor more frequently than it employs this specific terminology.

The obvious choice of terminology within the marriage metaphor would be “adultery” (נָאָף). This term is used by the prophets in several places, but generally where it occurs, it is condemning literal occurrences of adultery among the people of Israel or Judah (Jer. 5:7, 7:9, 23:14, 29:32; Hos 4:2, 13, 14). It occurs as a metaphor for Israel’s faithlessness relatively few times (Jer. 3:8-9; Ezek. 23:37; Hos. 3:1)\textsuperscript{46}.

By far the most common term for Israel’s infidelity in the prophets is זָנָה (to have illicit intercourse) and its derivatives. While this root is less precise in describing the nature of Israel’s sin, it has connotations that נָאָף lacks that make it a more rhetorically effective term. These are:“(1) habitual illicit activity, (2) a motive of personal gain, (3) a multiplicity of partners, (4) a treacherous and hardened woman, and (5) illicit sex only by females\textsuperscript{47}.

From the beginning, Yahweh warned his people against infidelity in the starkest terms. Immediately following the golden calf incident, Yahweh instructed Israel to destroy everything pertaining to Canaanite idolatry, because He“is a jealous god”, who will not tolerate His worship being given to another. Indeed, His very name is Jealous. Failure to do so created a risk that the Israelites will be enticed into making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and


\textsuperscript{46} It can be argued that the verses in Hosea 4 are speaking figuratively of the idolatrous worship at the high places. In light of the sexual dimension of Canaanite fertility religion, it is likely that Hosea is at least mixing the literal and metaphorical. In Hosea 3:1, it is clearly literal, but is explicitly connected to the allegorical nature of Hosea’s marriage.

\textsuperscript{47} Davidson, 311.
that the sons of Israel would marry their daughters and be led to “whore (נָזַה) after their gods” (Exod. 34:10-16).

English usage would ordinarily pair the verb “to whore” with the preposition “with”. The Hebrew idiom is the same when a human partner is in view, even metaphorically (Num. 25:1; Isa. 23:17; Jer. 3:1; etc.) However, the preposition after (אחר) is used consistently when the partner is an idol, demon, or a false God (Lev. 17:7, 20:5; Deut. 31:16; etc.). Ray Ortlund suggests that the choice of preposition is to emphasize the aspects of loyalty and relationship: “to ‘play the harlot after’ pagan gods is to cultivate a relationship with them, to render unto them one’s obedience and devotion, to walk in their ways and pursue their ideals. The net force of the idiom is not unlike ‘to go/follow after’ other gods, except that, marked by נָזַה, the imagery is sexual rather than ambulatory because the larger controlling motif is marital48.”

The noun “prostitutte” (נָזָה) which is derived from נָזָה occurs frequently in the prophets as well. Some of the uses are references to literal sexual sin with prostitutes (e.g., Hosea 4), but most are metaphorical comparisons of Israel or Judah to a prostitute. A נָזָה was a woman who engaged in sex as a commercial activity, for which she might be paid in money or gifts (see Gen. 38:5 as an example). This is distinct from a שְׁקֵדֹת, that is a shrine prostitute who offered her services in connection with one of the worship centers for the Canaanite fertility religion. The use of both terms for Tamar in Gen. 38 suggests that נָזָה is broad enough to encompass both commercial and religious activity.

Although it seems that commercial prostitution may have been quite common, it was clearly dishonorable. According to Davidson, “the prostitute is consistently portrayed as a

woman of low repute. To be reduced to prostitution was the depth of degradation. In Amos 7, Yahweh’s curse upon the false prophet Amaziah includes the promise that “Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city.” (Amos 7:17) Part of Ahab’s degradation consisted in the fact that when the chariot in which he had been killed was being washed by the pool of Samaria, the dogs licked up the blood and prostitutes bathed in the pool that contained the runoff. (1 Kgs. 22:38)

Israel’s infidelity consisted of three basic elements: (1) illicit entanglements with foreigners (both cultural and military), (2) idolatry, and (3) literal sexual sin. It was often the case that the three were interrelated. As an example, the politically motivated marriage of a king like Ahab to a pagan woman like Jezebel could be the occasion of introducing idolatrous worship. It was often the case that this idolatrous worship would include a sexual dimension or would at least reduce the standards of sexual fidelity present in God’s covenant with Israel. This basic pattern played out a number of times in the history of Israel and Judah.

Biblical Background for the Infidelity Metaphor

From one point of view, the Hebrew Bible could be regarded largely as a history of Israel’s repeated acts of infidelity to the covenant her Maker had established with her. Within days of being given the Decalogue, the people were engaging in idolatry at the very foot of the mountain where Moses met with God. Add to this their sacrificing to goat demons (Lev. 17:7), their idolatry at Baal-Peor (Num. 25), their worship of the Baals and Asherah during the time of the judges (Jdg. 6), their worship of Gideon’s ephod (Jdg. 8), and others too numerous to mention, and one quickly establishes a rich catalog of failure both historical and contemporary that the writing prophets could use as examples. Of these, the two historical instances that

49Davidson, 307.
receive the most attention are those that bookend the wilderness experience: the golden calf incident (Exod. 32) and Baal-Peor (Num. 25).

The Golden Calf Incident

During the 40 days that Moses was on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Law from God, the people began to fear that Moses had abandoned them. They asked Aaron to make “gods who shall go before us.” (Exod. 32:1) Using the jewelry that the people had received as plunder from the Egyptians, Aaron cast a golden calf idol. For the source of this image, one might look to Egypt and assume that either the god Apis or the goddess Hathor was intended. However, Apis was worshipped as a live bull rather than as an image, and Hathor was symbolized by a heifer rather than a bull-calf. Davidson suggests that it was more likely that even at this point, the idol was linked with the Canaanite god Baal, whose cult animal was a bull and whose worship was present in the Nile delta at that time.

Aaron seems to have lacked a sense of the antithesis between Yahweh and the pagan idols. Rather than reject the people’s demand for “gods”, Aaron attempted to syncretize their worship with the worship of Yahweh. After having erected the calf, Aaron proclaimed a feast “to the Lord.” (Exod. 32:5). Following the division of the kingdom, Jeroboam repeated essentially this same sin. In an effort to keep the hearts of the people from being wooed back to the king of Judah as they went to worship, Jeroboam established two worship centers (one at Dan and one at Beersheba), which were ostensibly Yahwistic, but were dominated by golden calf idols.

---

Davidson, 97.
It is possible but not certain that the rising up to play (צחק) mentioned in v.6 implies sexual activity. There are other instances where the term צחק seems to imply sexual activity. For instance, Abimelech’s discovery that Rebekah was actually the wife of Isaac was due to Abimelech looking out a window and discovering them laughing (צחק) together. If Davidson is correct in relating the calf to Baal worship, ritual sexual activity would be consistent with the practices of Baalism.

**Baal-Peor (Numbers 25)**

The incident at Baal-Peor occurred at the very end of Israel’s wilderness wandering, after the death of Aaron and immediately prior to the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua. It is the paradigmatic episode of Israel’s unfaithfulness, and it is referred to explicitly in both the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 106:28; Hos. 9:10) and the New (e.g., Rev. 2:14). In the account in Numbers 25 we have all three elements of Israel’s infidelity (failure to separate from the pagan nations, literal sexual immorality, and idolatry) juxtaposed.

In brief, the incident occurred due to the failure of the Moabite king Balak’s plan to have the seer Balaam curse the people of Israel. (Num. 22-24) Numbers 24 ends with Balaam and Balak going their separate ways with Balaam not having received any pay for his attempted services. Chapter 25 begins with the observation that “the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.” (Num. 25:1) The attendant consequence of this was that “Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor.” (Num. 25:2) Apparently right as God had declared that the elders should be hung in the sun for failing to police this, an Israelite named Zimri brought a Midianite woman (the Midianites were in league with the Moabites during the incident) into the camp. Aaron’s grandson Phinehas saw the man and followed him to intervene. Apparently catching
the couple *in flagrante delicto*, he pinned the both of them to the ground with one thrust of his spear. Yahweh praised him for this and turned away His wrath from Israel: “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy.” (Num. 25:11)

Davidson suggests that the sin was not a case of intermarriage or recreational sex with the Moabite women. Rather, cultic sexuality is at the heart of this sin. This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where men are accused of committing נ. Davidson explains this as forming an explicit link between sexual activity and idolatry.

“By using a term elsewhere reserved to describe the sexual activity of women, the narrator clearly links the sexual activity to the spiritual harlotry of Israel against Yahweh, a phenomenon of ‘dual harlotry’ (religious and carnal) that will appear again and again throughout the OT canon. In Num. 25:1 zana ‘refers to apostasy from the covenant, expressed in the form of intercourse with the Moabite women. Therefore zana, which everywhere else has a feminine subject, can have Israel as its subject here, because Israel plays the female role in relationship to Yahweh51.”

The passage is also remarkable for its fervent depiction of jealousy, both Yahweh’s which threatens to destroy the nation and Phinehas’s which preserves the nation by upholding the boundary of the relationship between Yahweh and his people.

**Cultural Background for the Infidelity Metaphor**

Idolatry is the instigating factor in Hosea’s prophecy. The first explicit mention of it is in the second chapter, where the unfaithful wife is charged with having spent her material

51Davidson, 100.
provision of gold, silver, oil, wine, and grain on the Baals (2:8). In the oracles of chapters 4-14, various charges are laid against Israel, including lying (4:2; 12:1), stealing (4:2; 12:7), murder (4:2; 6:8-9; 12:1), drunkenness (7:5), divination (4:12), and depending on foreign kings for aid (5:13; 7:11; 8:9-10; 12:1; 14:3). All of these seem to have their root in idolatry. Israel’s idolatry is directly condemned in most chapters of the book (4:13-14, 17; 8:4-6, 11-14; 9:9-10; 10:1-6; 11:2; 13:1-3; 14:3, 8).

From its beginning in 931BC, the Northern Kingdom was characterized by idolatry. This initially took the form of the golden calf shrines at Dan and Bethel, but the degree of syncretism with the religion of their neighbors increased. Beginning with Ahab (869-850BC), Baal-worship became an official part of the northern cultus (1 Kgs. 16). Despite the stunning rebuke of Baalism through the ministry of the prophet Elijah, Baalism continued to be part of the religious milieu. The picture painted in Hosea suggests that rather than directly competing with the (already deformed) worship of Yahweh, Baalism was syncretized with the worship of Yahweh. Baal is expressly mentioned seven times in Hosea (2:8, 13, 16, 17; 9:10; 11:2; 13:1). This occurred to such a degree that the Israelites went so far as to call Yahweh “Baal” (Hos. 2:16)!

One of the ways in which literal sexual sin and idolatry were entangled is through cult prostitution. Scholars debate the degree to which cult prostitution was present in ancient Near Eastern religion. There is only a single explicit reference to the practice in the Latter Prophets. In Hosea 4:14, the prophet says that the men of Israel “go aside with prostitutes (נשה) and sacrifice with cult prostitutes (נושה).” The parallelism is set up in such a way that the latter half

---

of the phrase is expansive of the first rather than epexegetical of it. Hosea accuses them of trafficking in both commercial and ritual prostitution.

**Infidelity in the Latter Prophets**

The prophets go to great lengths to emphasize Yahweh’s faithfulness to His covenant using a variety of metaphors. His א and ח are contrasted with the lack of those in His people. When we come to the depiction of that contrast as marital infidelity, our handling of God’s Word is apt to become squeamish. Admittedly, as a father, I am glad that Great Commission Publications has never felt the need to illustrate Ezek. 23:19-20 (“she played the whore in the land of Egypt and lusted after her lovers there, whose members were like those of donkeys”), but some ministers are reluctant even to preach from passages like these.

Many feminist authors are especially uncomfortable with the negative feminine portrayal of Israel’s faithlessness and the graphic depiction of its consequences. The following paragraph by Katheryn Darr is typical of feminist commentary on the subject.

> “Leave it to Ezekiel, however, fully to exploit unfaithful-female imagery. His lengthy, lewd indictments of adulterous Israel and sister Samaria in Ezek 16 and Ezek 23 take shame (not pride) of place among examples of biblical pornography and bristle with difficulties, since imagery, especially biblical imagery, that details the degradation and humiliation of women, that describes female sexuality as the object of male possession and control, that displays women being battered and mutilated, and that presents such violence as a means toward healing a broken marital relationship can have murderous consequences.”

Even when the issue is not the graphicness of the text, there is a tendency to weaken the impact of the most straightforward readings of the text. For instance, numerous exegetical

---

approaches attempt to avoid the alleged problem of a prophet of God marrying an immoral woman. Sadly, I suspect that our discomfort may stem less from a desire to protect the honor of God than from a desire to avoid the inevitable conclusion that in all too many situations, it is our churches and our hearts that Scripture would identify with the harlot.

**Hosea 1**

As mentioned above, Yahweh called Hosea to reenact the relationship between Israel and Himself. The reason for Hosea to choose an immoral woman is that “the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” (Hos. 1:2) One of the most hotly contested subjects with regard to Hosea is whether Gomer was literally immoral at the time that Hosea married her, or did he only see that her immorality was present in nascent form as he looked back on the relationship. Space precludes interaction with the arguments. In my judgment, it is essential to treat Hosea’s marriage as a historical marriage to a genuinely immoral woman.

If Yahweh spoke to Hosea and commanded him to take a wife of whoredom, it would be disobedience for him to marry someone who was not clearly guilty of it. Similarly, to suppose that Hosea is reflecting on his experience and realizing the Lord’s involvement is contrary to the typical prophetic usage of phrases like “the LORD said”. The parallel between Hosea and Yahweh is strengthened by the reality of her promiscuity. As Ehud Ben Zvi observes, “It bears note that the stress on the precise selection of a promiscuous woman as his wife would be pointless if the world of the text did not implicitly allow the existence of other and better women from among whom Hosea could have chosen his wife”.54

Boo Heflin is among those who argue that Hosea believed that Israel was “innocent at the beginning of the nation’s relationship with God” and only later became unfaithful. As evidence, he cites Hos 9:10: “Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved.” I believe that Heflin makes a mistake in his approach to this metaphor. Hosea 9 makes a number of historical, contemporary, and future allusions (e.g., “Ephraim shall return to Egypt” (9:3), “they have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah” (9:9), “Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal” (9:15)), and they are clearly not in chronological order. The point of the metaphor is God’s delight in Israel, not their supposed innocence.

Although the idea of the wilderness naturally and likely intentionally reminds us of Israel’s wilderness experience, Baal-peor is most likely mentioned not because it was Israel’s first transgression, but because it was a transgression in which idolatry and sexual immorality were combined (cf. Num. 25:1-5; Deut. 4:3). It is a mistake to see 9:10 as referring to the initiation of the relationship between God and Israel.

**Hosea 2**

As mentioned in the analysis of Hosea 1 relating to the marriage portion of the metaphor, Hosea was called to marry an immoral woman. Hosea makes frequent use of forms of נָשָׁה and its derivatives. In chapter 2 a strong case can be made that the focus has shifted from

---

57 Indeed, if Hosea were trying to make his point chronologically, it seems more likely to me that he would have used the incident of the golden calf.
Hosea’s literal marriage to Yahweh’s marriage to Israel. This passage makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of Israel’s infidelity.

First, Israel’s immorality (identified as both whoring and adultery) was becoming central to her identity. Some scholars see the references to the immorality being upon her face and between her breasts in verse 2 as references to adornment, perhaps some form of jewelry associated with the fertility cult. More likely, the whoring on her face represents her intent and the adultery between her breasts signifies that she cherishes it close to her heart. The sensuality of mentioning her breasts is likely quite intentional as well.\(^{58}\)

In verses 5 and 7 we see the theme of Israel “going after” or “pursuing” her lovers. She is not merely a prostitute who waits for a passing john, she chases them the way a victorious army follows after a routed foe or a hunter pursues his prey. Her motive in doing so is material gain. She believes that her lovers have provided her with all of the staples that come through agricultural endeavor. Verse 13 makes it clear that these lovers are the Baals and that her going after them consisted of sacrificing to them. Like a prostitute, she sees the material blessings she gets as her “wages”. (Ho 2:12)

The irony is that the increase of Israel’s land was given to her not by the Baals, but by Yahweh. (Hos.2:9) Not only does she exacerbate her sin by misattributing the source of her blessings, but she goes farther and takes the gold and silver that Yahweh has given her and uses them to construct Baal idols.

---

Hosea 4

Hosea 4 begins the series of poetic oracles that make up the remainder of the book. The oracles lack introductory or closing phrases, so it is difficult to divide them precisely, but wherever one places the bounds of a particular oracle, the passages group into two cycles (4:1 – 11:11; 11:12 – 14:8) that repeat a progression of Israel’s sin, God’s anger, and God’s turning from His anger to restore Israel. Hosea 4 describes Israel’s condition in terms of three things that they lack: faithfulness (אָיַח), steadfast love (חֶדֶד), and the knowledge (יְדַע) of God. These are the fundamental covenant obligations of Genesis 2, even if they are presented under somewhat different language. In place of these things, there are a variety of sins: swearing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery, and idolatry. The passage expends its greatest force on the sin of “whoring”, which includes literal sexual sin and its connection to idolatrous ritual.

The whole situation is described as originating in a “spirit of whoredom”. In Old Testament usage, the phrase “spirit of” in conjunction with an abstract quality generally signifies the presence of that quality in the person or persons described to such a degree that it is essential to their actions. Often the person is presented as the passive recipient of the spirit. For example, Yahweh filled the craftsmen with a “spirit of skill” to prepare the Levitical garments (Exod. 28:3), Joshua was filled with the “spirit of wisdom” when Moses passed the leadership of Israel to him (Deut. 34:9), and the Lord brought judgment on Israel by mingling within her “a spirit of confusion” (Isa. 19:14).

---

Hosea does not indicate where this spirit of whoredom originated, but he is clear that Israel’s actions flow from it. Indeed, her situation is dire, because they are so dominated by this spirit that repentance is impossible for them: “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. For the spirit of whoredom is within them…” (Hos. 5:4)

Isaiah 1:21

In Isaiah, “the second major character alongside God is Zion.” Indeed, there are 48 references to Zion and 50 to Jerusalem in Isaiah, many of which are personifications. Either name may be generally taken as a synecdoche for God’s people. Isaiah 1 contains only a single reference to harlotry. In Isaiah’s use of the metaphor, Jerusalem is depicted as having once exhibited the covenant virtues of faithfulness and righteousness, but she is now described as a whore.

As Isaiah furthers his indictment in chapter 1, his focus is neither on idolatry nor sexual sin. Rather he condemns injustice, oppression, bribery, thievery, bloodshed, and external formal compliance with the regulations of worship in the temple that is not reflected in obedient hearts. This is an important development of the infidelity metaphor, because it makes it clear that the faithfulness to his covenant Yahweh desires is not a matter of religious forms, but is a matter of total commitment to the covenant that comes from the heart and affects every aspect of His people’s lives.

In Isaiah 2, an additional indictment is given. In that chapter, he condemns their intermingling with foreigners, their importation of foreign customs, and the presence of

---

60 Christopher Seitz quoted in Darr, 60.
idolatry, so it is clear that these kinds of covenant infidelity were present in the Judah or Isaiah’s day. At this point, however, Isaiah does not connect those to the marriage metaphor.

**Isaiah 57**

In chapter 57, Isaiah employs the analogy of harlotry in a manner reminiscent of Hosea. Here, the focus is almost entirely on idolatry. Both male and female imagery is employed in the passage. The hearers are described as sons of a sorceress and an adulterer. The ESV translates the feminine verb תִזְּנֶה as a noun, “loose woman”. This is the approach of English translations, but keeping the verbal sense, as Spence-Jones does “and that thyselfcommittest whoredom” is both grammatically preferable and better for the flow of the passage. Judah’s inherited tendencies have come to literal expression as demonstrated in the remainder of the passage 61.

There is little consistency in gender for the remaining verbs in the passage. Isaiah flows readily back and forth from masculine to feminine verbs although the subject is always faithless Judah.

Isaiah accuses them of “burning with lust... under every green tree.” (Isa. 57:5) The phrase originates in the Deuteronomic command to destroy the idols of the nations that Israel was dispossessing: “You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree.” (Deut. 12:2) Rather than carrying out the required destruction, Judah instead worships there. Jeremiah (2:20; 3:6,13; 17:2), and Ezekiel (6:13; 20:47) will later pick up this theme of idolatrous worship on “on every high hill” and “under every green tree”. The choice of wording

---

Cf. Keil and Delitzsch who offer a reasoned justification for the more common translation.
suggests pervasiveness of idolatry. Apparently, idolatrous shrines were as common in Judah as Starbucks is in 21st century America.

Isaiah specifically connects worship at these sites with lust. Judah sets her bed to offer sacrifice (v.7), she uncovers it and makes it wide (signifying the extent of her harlotry) and there looks on “nakedness”. The bed is also identified as “their bed”. The antecedent of the third person plural pronouns is never made entirely explicit. It is first applied to the “smooth stones of the valley”, which Spence-Jones said were worshipped by many Semitic peoples. Given the transition from valley to mountain, “they/them” seems to be inclusive of all the various idols that might have been worshipped in Judah at the time, including but not limited to “Baal and Ashtoreth-worship from Phœnicia, Molech-worship from Moab and Ammon, worship of the Queen of Heaven from Syria, high-place worship from the Canaanites, and stone-worship from their own remote Mesopotamian ancestors62.

In v.8, Judah is accused of making “a covenant for yourself with them.” The warning in Exod. 34 had forbidden the people of Israel to covenant with the people of the land, lest they be led into idolatrous worship. If we take covenanting (כר) in its most solemn sense, we find an even deeper sin – the people of Judah bind themselves directly to idols rather than to Yahweh. Alternatively, כַּר may be used here in commercial sense (“contract with them” or similar), in which case the sense is that Judah is a prostitute contracting for her wages63.

---

62Spence-Jones, 357.
Micah 1:7 portrays the construction material of idols as having been gathered “from the fee of a prostitute”.
Jeremiah 2:18-25

Jeremiah continues the condemnation of Judah for her idolatry with the Baals (Jer. 2:8, 20, 23). Jeremiah says that there infidelity is unique among the nations – even idol worshippers don’t exchange their gods, but Judah has traded the glory of Israel for worthless idols. (Jer. 2:11) Jeremiah heightens the sexual connotations of Judah’s idolatry. The verb translated “bow down” (צָעָה) in verse 20 is not the word used for prostration in worship. Given the context, the imagery is likely that she assumes a position for sexual intercourse.

Jeremiah connects their idolatry to their foreign entanglements. Sexuality is again the dominant metaphor, but Judah’s behavior is so debased that she is no longer pictured even as a harlot. Judah’s vacillating attempts at military alliances are portrayed as a camel or a donkey in heat, running back and forth following the scent of a male. Her love for foreigners is as uncontrollable as the biological impulses of a brute animal. Similar, but less graphic, language is employed regarding Israel's chasing after the nations in Hosea 8:8-10, where Israel’s going to Assyria to hire allies is compared to the wandering of a wild donkey and the hiring of lovers.

Ezekiel 16:15-58

I have already provided some introductory comments on this chapter in dealing with its contribution to the marriage metaphor. It is far too long to provide detailed commentary, so I will confine my observations here to those things that develop the central themes.

As in Hosea 2, one of the aggravating factors of Judah’s whoring is that she uses the gifts that Yahweh had bestowed on her to accomplish it: her beauty to attract lovers (v. 15), her garments to construct shrines (v. 16), her gold and silver to make idols (v. 17), and her oil.

---

incense, bread, and honey as offerings (v.18 – 20). Her wickedness rises to new heights in that she takes the children whom she had borne to Yahweh, and offers them up to the idols.

Judah’s whorings were pervasive. Where Isaiah and Jeremiah had described the rural settings of “every hill and every green tree”, Jeremiah shows us the urban settings of “every square” (v. 24) and “every street” (v. 25). She was also indiscriminate, whoring with whomever she could find: Egyptians, Philistines, Assyrians, and Chaldeans (26-29). Moreover, she was unique in her degradation. Where real prostitutes receive their wages, she “spurns payment”. Instead, Yahweh’s adulterous wife (v. 32) gave payment to her lovers instead. (Ezek. 16:31-34)

Ezekiel sees an insulting family resemblance in Jerusalem. He repeats the claim that she was the daughter of a Hittite and Amorite (v.45). Moreover, she is just like her sisters. The comparison to Samaria is obvious (v. 46). While his hearers would have certainly found it offensive, one imagines that the identification of Sodom as a sister would have been regarded by Ezekiel’s hearers as completely beyond the pale. Jerusalem had become like them, but worse (16:47), so much so that they seem righteous in comparison to her (v. 52)

**Ezekiel 23**

Ezekiel continues the comparison of Jerusalem (Oholibah) with her older sister Samaria (Oholah) in chapter 23. He returns to the time of the Egyptian captivity and says that they played the whore even in their youth (v. 3). The graphic imagery of the fondling of their “virgin breasts” perhaps suggests sexual play not consummated in intercourse. The terminology for marriage (“they became mine”) is an unusually passive description for the process, perhaps to distance Yahweh from a marriage that he now finds disgusting. As mentioned earlier, the
marriage to two sisters is an adaptation of the metaphor to the historical circumstances of the divided kingdom, not an approbation of polygamy.

Here again, the issue for both sisters is principally their lust for foreigners, whether Assyrian, Babylonian, or Egyptian. The longing is portrayed as completely sensual in nature, beginning with the demonstrated virility of the Assyrian warriors, moving to Oholibah’s slusting after Babylonians whom she had seen only in images, to her fascination with the Egyptians who had first seduced her. This reference to her Egyptian lovers is לָתָם, a feminine noun. In every other occurrence it refers to a female concubine, yet they possess enormous male sex organs. Ortlund says that the imagery here is “a repulsive caricature of womanish, sybaritic lechers” in contrast to the glamorous picture of her virile eastern lovers. With each step, the sisters pursue more degraded lovers, turn from them in disgust, and become more disgusting themselves. In the end, her former lovers will grow disgusted with her, and will bring her to a desolate state (v. 29).

In verse 36, Ezekiel shifts from political entanglement back to idolatry. The description of the sisters’ committing adultery with idols (Ezek. 23:37) echoes the imagery and themes of chapter 16. Child sacrifice is again brought into view, as is the syncretistic nature of Judah’s idolatry. On the same day that they would sacrifice children to Moloch, the people of Jerusalem would profane Yahweh’s temple (v. 38). This is far more than a matter of breaking an external code. Their profanation of the Sabbath and child sacrifice is described by Yahweh as things “they have done to me”. (Ezek. 23:32)

65 Ortlund, 125.
Divorce: Dissolution of the Covenant Relationship

The pervasive and persistent infidelity of Israel and Judah was incompatible with their relationship with Yahweh. Because of that covenant relationship, His name was profaned among the nations (Ezek. 36:22) to whom Israel was supposed to be an example. Within the framework of the Mosaic Law, Yahweh would have been justified in seeking his adulterous wife’s execution. Indeed, at times, utter destruction was the threatened consequence for their rebellion (Exod. 32:9). To destroy them, however, would thwart His announced plan for Israel. Within the marital depiction of the relationship, another option presented itself – divorce.

In some circles, the notion of God initiating a divorce is unthinkable. At different times and in different places, the Church has taken a variety of positions on the permissibility of divorce. Space precludes a detailed examination of the positions taken. For our purposes, it is sufficient to deal with the most basic question: are there any circumstances under which a marriage can be dissolved? The Church of Rome has long taken the position that marriage is a metaphysical union that by definition cannot be dissolved. There are few references to divorce prior to Augustine, and they are subject to different interpretations. “Orthodox” Catholic scholars believe the early fathers to be consistent in upholding absolute indissolubility. Eastern Orthodox scholars looking at the same texts believe the early fathers to be consistent with their position that there are cases where divorce and remarriage can be lawful.

In the West, there was a clear movement toward the position of irrevocability with the teaching of Augustine. Following Jerome, Augustine translated the musterion as sacramentum in Eph. 5:32. Thus began the Roman Catholic elevation of marriage into a sacrament of the church. While Augustine continued to hold that marriage was a moral obligation that should not
be dissolved, the development of the concept of sacrament among the scholastics transformed it into a bond that could not be dissolved. At a practical level, this had the effect of making annulment necessary and increasingly common. If marriage could not be dissolved, it was vital to demonstrate that no valid marriage had occurred.

The essential point for our discussion is that for much of Western Church history, a covenantal perspective on marriage was displaced by a sacramental perspective. The re-integration of covenant as an organizing principle of theology among the Reformers tended to establish the view that “marriage is not a metaphysical status which cannot destroyed; it is rather a moral commitment which should be honored.” As shown earlier in the section on marriage, the covenantal perspective is consistent with Scripture. Moreover, it is essential for understanding the treatment of divorce in the Latter Prophets. Yahweh’s actions in the passages to be considered cannot be reconciled with the position of absolute indissolubility.

The Pentateuch provided clear sanctions for a married woman caught in adultery, or for a man caught engaging in sexual activity with another man’s wife: “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death.” (Lev. 20:10) However, we do not have any narrative example of the death penalty being carried out for adultery. It is possible that the requirement for witnesses made it difficult to

---

67 The notion of annulment should probably not be discarded entirely. Consider the putting away of foreign wives in Ezra 9-10. On first reading, this might seem to suggest a significant expansion of the grounds of divorce. However, the words used (צ  א and ל) are not the terminology used elsewhere for divorce. It appears that Ezra viewed his action not as the dissolution of legitimate marriages but as the nullification of unions which were contrary to the Torah. Any attempt to construct a doctrine of annulment for the present age would need to carefully work out the interrelation of the Ezra passage with 1 Cor. 7. Doing so is far beyond the scope of the present work. Those desiring a further discussion of the Ezra passage are encouraged to consult Davidson, 321-322
68 Atkinson, 91.
prove adultery. The warnings against adultery in Proverbs 7 imply that an offended husband could choose to accept financial compensation rather than to exact the death penalty. (Prov. 6:34-35). By the time of Jeremiah, it seems that divorce had become an acceptable alternative for suspected adultery. (Jer. 3:8). In terms of the metaphor, it is essential that a lesser penalty be invoked, so that the possibility of reconciliation remains.

Biblical Background for the Divorce Metaphor

There is surprisingly little background material concerning divorce prior to the prophets. The subject is treated briefly in a handful of passages in the Torah. Blenkinsopp somewhat overstates the case when he says that “there is no legislation bearing directly on marital dissolution.” He is correct in stating that Deuteronomy 24, the passage which has been the source for most commentary related to divorce, is properly a law concerning remarriage. However, the rather complicated set of dependent clauses does establish the requirement for a certificate of divorce and at least hint that divorce should not be entered into casually, but should only proceed where there are particular grounds for doing so.

The primary exegetical difficulty of Deut. 24:1-4 concerns the grounds, specifically the phrase translated “some indecency” (ESV) or “an indecent matter” (Instone-Brewer). This phrase was at the heart of later rabbinical debate concerning divorce. In Hebrew, the phrase is עֶרְּוַת דָּבָר, literally, “nakedness of a thing”. The exact phrase occurs only one other place in the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 23:14. There, the concern is that the Hebrews should keep their latrines outside the camp and cover their excrement “Because the Lord your God walks in the

---

69 Blenkinsopp, 65.
midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp
must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you." (Deut. 23:14)

A complete discussion of the arguments surrounding the meaning of the phrase would
take far more space than I can spare. The order of the words is the opposite of what we might
expect. Sadly, English translations typically smooth this out for the reader. It is likely that the
reason for the inversion of the terms is to place the emphasis on the nakedness. Nakedness
(רֶשֶׁת) occurs 54 times in the Hebrew Bible. It can refer to simple physical nakedness (Exod.
28:42); as part of the phrase “uncover the nakedness of”, which is a euphemism for sexual
interaction (Lev. 18) or as a metaphor for spying (Gen. 42). In every case, the word carries a
shameful connotation⁷⁰, and in the Prophets is specifically the result of God’s judgment.

The phrase was at the heart of the controversy regarding divorce into which the
Pharisees attempted to draw Jesus. (Matt. 19, Mark 10) It is commonly recognized that in the
exception clause (μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ) Jesus is referring to עֶרְוַת דָּבָר and correcting the Hillelite
misinterpretation of it. The phrasing used in Matthew’s record is apparently not influenced by
the Septuagint’s rendering, ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα, which is as vague in Greek as is in
Hebrew⁷¹. The vagary of the phrase is useful in the context of the metaphor as presented in the
prophets given the character and extent of Israel’s depravity (both literal and metaphorical).

Cultural Background for the Divorce Metaphor

Although the Law prescribed capital punishment as at least an option for punishing
adultery, the Hebrew Bible does not contain any example of the penalty being enacted, nor do

---

⁷⁰ This is in marked contrast to the word used in Gen. 2:25, נְצֵר. It is generally (but not always) used of a
condition that is undesirable, but not necessarily shameful.
we have an extrabiblical example of an execution for adultery. We have the same difficulty in understanding the cultural background for divorce among the Hebrews that we have for marriage. Our extrabiblical examples are all either foreign, or relatively late. Judging from what we do have, it seems that by the time of the intertestamental period, divorce had become the common way of dealing with adultery (and a host of other marital failings on the part of one party or the other, usually the wife). The most thorough discussion of the evidence of which I am aware is provided by David Instone-Brewer in *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

There are four particularly relevant details that we can glean from cultural data. First, as noted above, Deuteronomy 24 commands the divorcing husband to give the wife a certificate of divorce. This requirement is unique to Israel and biblical Law. Some of the evidence concerning divorce comes from remnants of papyrus divorce certificates. The importance of the certificate was that it served as protection for the woman, making it possible for her to remarry without worrying that her first husband might later reassert his claim (a situation which could occur in neighboring cultures). Within Jewish culture, the right to remarry was an uncontested part of the nature of divorce. According to Atkinson:

> This is certainly the way the Mishnah interpreted the situation. "The essential formula in the bill of divorce is "Lo, thou art free to marry any man." R. Judah says "Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry what soever man thou wilt.""

Secondly, it would appear that there were also *verbasolemnia* for divorce. Mordechai Friedman suggests that the standard formula was, "You are not my wife, and I am not your

---

71 Instone-Brewer, 28.
72 Atkinson, 105.
husband.” This is the antithesis of the standard Jewish marriage formula of later centuries which was uncovered in excavations at Elephantine\textsuperscript{74}, and it is similar to the divorce formulas from surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures\textsuperscript{75}.

Thirdly, “hate” seems to have been employed as a technical term for divorce. The term is used in both Deut. 24 and Mal. 2. Scholars are divided as to whether “hate” refers to only to groundless divorce or to divorce of any kind\textsuperscript{76}. It is not clear whether this sense is employed metaphorically by the prophets. In most cases where the latter prophets speak of Yahweh “hating” something, the broader, nontechnical sense is most appropriate (e.g., “I hate, I despise your feasts” (Amos 5:21); “Every evil of theirs is in Gilgal, there I began to hate them.” (Hos. 9:15)). The two best candidates for a metaphorical reference to the technical term are Isa. 60:15, “Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever,” and Jer. 12:8b, “She has lifted up her voice against me, therefore I hate her.” Neither passage otherwise employs marital metaphors, so it seems equally likely that hate is being used in the nontechnical sense in these passages as well.

Lastly, the divorce proceedings may have involved some kind of ritual stripping of the wife who was being sent away. If so, the symbolism of the act likely pointed to the removal of the husband’s protection and provision. D. A. Garrett does not believe that the case for the presence of such an element has been firmly established. In his view, the motif of stripping in

\textsuperscript{74} Mordechai A. Friedman, “Israel’s Response in Hosea 2:17b: ‘You Are My Husband,’” \textit{JBL} 99 (1980), 199.
\textsuperscript{75} Dearman, Location 1345.
\textsuperscript{76} Some scholars come to differing conclusions within their own work. Instone-Brewer asserts that the term signifies groundless divorce on page 28, but on page 78 says that it was a common term within the Ancient Near East and did not indicate “revulsion or anger”.

the prophets is an intrusion of the realities of the conquest and captivity to which the metaphor points rather than an element of the metaphor drawn from the cultural background.

**Divorce in the Latter Prophets**

With that background in mind, let us examine the three prophetic passages which most explicitly employ the divorce metaphor.

**Hosea 2:2-3, 9-10**

Hosea 2:2 begins a call to the children to plead with their mother on behalf of the husband using phrasing that is widely recognized as a formula of divorce: “she is not my wife, and I am not her husband.” This passage likely continues the didactic oracle begun in 1:10. Interpreters are divided on the issue of whether this is purely a pronouncement from God about Israel or a reflection of divorce proceedings initiated by Hosea. Several considerations make the former view more likely. The imperatives of 2:1 and 2:2 are second person plurals. The pronouncements of 2:1 (“you are my people”, “you have received mercy”) are directed to “your brothers” and “your sisters”, both plural, whereas, so far as we know, Hosea only had one daughter. The issues of the indictment move rapidly from an individual woman’s infidelity to a community’s spiritual infidelity (“which they used for Baal” – Hos. 2:8), and the promise that she will answer as she did “at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt” (Hos.

---

78 Once could reasonably include Hosea 9 as well, with 9:15 “I will drive them out of my house” echoing the language of Deut. 24:3. However, if that phrase is an employment of the divorce metaphor, it is far less explicit than the other examples cited.
79 Heflin, 16.
80 Dearman, Location 1319.
2:15). However, it is reasonable to believe that Hosea’s experience of the dissolution of his own marriage was very much in his mind as he delivered this message.

The opening “She is not my wife, and I am not her husband” (Hos. 2:2) is similar to the divorce formulas from surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures, and it is the antithesis of the verbasolemnia from the Elephantine marriage contracts. Two concerns make it questionable whether the divorce is finalized or only threatened. There is no written certificate of divorce as commanded in Deut. 24:1 (by contrast, Is. 50:1 and Jer. 3:8 both mention the certificate). Similarly, there are no witnesses.

On the other hand, the expectation that the woman will desire to return to her “first husband” (Hos. 2:7) suggests that the marriage is no longer in force. Dearman, who thinks that Hosea’s family is still in view, explains the lack of a certificate by pointing out that chapter 2 describes the tragedy from the point of view of private conversation internal to the family rather than from the point of view of any public proceedings that may have followed from it.

English translations generally shift to translating the majority of verbs in the passage with future tense forms. This is a reasonable option for showing that the events of verse 3 and follow as consequences of the mother not putting “away her whoring from her face”. The events are hypothetical at the moment of writing. As it turns out in the development of redemptive history, the events fall out as Hosea had warned.

Hosea 2:3 begins a series of threatened consequences. In the event that the divorce is carried out, Yahweh will “strip her naked and make her as in the day she was born.” We find in

---

81 Dearman, Location 1345.
83 Dearman, Location 1369.
this a reversal of the husband’s symbolic covering of the woman with his cloak. Feminist scholars tend to approach this as an instance of wife battering or even sexual abuse. However, within the logic of the passage itself it is both a symmetrical consequence of the woman’s willingly exposing herself to her lovers and a withdrawal of the husband’s gifts of sustenance.

Whether actual divorce ceremonies could involve a ritual stripping of at least the outer garments is uncertain at best. The intensity of the language suggests that the consequences are more violent that would have occurred in a literal divorce proceeding. This is further reason for thinking that chapter 2 has moved from the allegorical relationship of Hosea and Gomer to an oracle more directly concerned with the relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

The threatened consequences include a withdrawal of the grain, wine, and oil which her husband had given her. Physical sustenance was both symbolized in the marriage ceremony and guaranteed by the law. (Exod. 21:8-10). There is both a metaphorical aspect to this (an adulteress who was being divorced would no longer be provided these basic staples by her husband) and a literal, prophetic aspect (Yahweh’s judgments on His people routinely included agricultural disaster that would cut off these staples). There is an element of symmetry in this consequence as well. Israel had taken the material blessings which Yahweh had “lavished on her” (Hos. 2:8) and used those blessings for the Baals.

**Isaiah 50:1**

Isaiah 50 does not develop a coherent message throughout the chapter. Spence-Jones conjectures that it is a collection of detached fragments that were assembled without regard to
subject matter\textsuperscript{84}. In any case, verses 1-3 stand apart. They provide the first explicit reference to a divorce certificate given to His people by Yahweh. Given Isaiah’s audience and the location of this passage in the second section of the book, it is likely that Judah is being addressed.

Like Hosea 2, Isaiah 50:1 addresses the children. The question “Where is your mother’s certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away?” is a rhetorical question\textsuperscript{85}. Yahweh’s point is precisely that there is no certificate of divorce, and therefore, no divorce. Davidson sees the positive statement “for your transgressions your mother was sent away” that ends the verse as a play on words. Isaiah moves from הֲנָשָׁה as a technical term for divorce to its general meaning.

**Jeremiah 3**

Jeremiah also references the bill of divorce in Jeremiah 3:8. Appearing before King Josiah, he compares the harlotry of Judah with the harlotry of Israel. Judah is shown to be more wicked than Israel, because she had the benefit of Israel’s example: “She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.” (Jer. 3:8) Despite the depiction of Yahweh as the initiator of the divorce, Jeremiah makes it clear that the actual rupture of the relationship was entirely the choice of Judah: “As a treacherous wife leaves her husband, so have you been treacherous to me.” (Jer. 3:20)

**Reconciliation: Establishment of a New Covenant Relationship**

In the majority of the passages where the marriage metaphor occurs, the prophets look beyond Israel’s infidelity and the breaking of the covenant relationship. They hold out the hope


\textsuperscript{85} *Ibid.*
for a future relationship that attains to the ideal of marriage between Yahweh and one unified people, complete in its exclusivity, permanence, and intimacy. In the context of the repeated failures of Israel and Judah, reconciliation was problematic. All the way back to the time of the Judges, there was a repeating pattern of Israel/Judah making a show of turning to Yahweh when afflicted by her enemies, and falling back into sin as soon as the crisis had passed. This pattern especially continued in Judah, where, during the reigns of the occasional good kings, there would be at least partial efforts to stamp out idolatry. These efforts were immediately undone as soon as the next bad king took the throne. Jeremiah describes the pattern as Judah returning to Yahweh not “with her whole heart”, but in pretense. (Jer. 3:10)

Consequently, the prophets often described the renewed relationship as one the involved “a change in the order of creation itself and in the life of humanity (Hos. 2:20; cf. Isa. 11; Zec. 9:9-10)\(^86\). This change is one that must be initiated by Yahweh, and that results in a world “in which the woman would not be able to sin again (Hos. 2.20; cf. Jer. 31.30-33; Ezek. 36:26-27)\(^87\).” Such a holistic change creates a situation in which the relationship cannot ever be broken again due to the unfaithfulness of the people of God.

**Biblical Background for the Reconciliation Metaphor**

The Hebrew Bible has relatively little material that could be regarded as background for a marital reconciliation metaphor. The closest to a narrative example would be Michal’s restoration to David, which is rather far afield since Michal was taken from David rather than lawfully divorced from him. (1 Sam. 25:44) Even given that, the restoration of Michal to David

---

\(^{86}\) Ben Zvi, 368.

\(^{87}\) ibid.
did not lead to a successful restored marriage. The passage which is most relevant is Deuteronomy 24:1-4. As mentioned above, it is has sometimes been regarded as case law concerning divorce. It is more properly regarded as case law concerning remarriage. The complex syntax of the passage sets up a scenario, with three conditions (some of which include ancillary details like the requirement for the certificate of divorce) and a single conclusion. To summarize the passage in the simplest possible form: a woman may not remarry a man from whom she has been previously divorced if she has married another man in between.

Westbrook and Wells classify the various scholarly proposals for the motivation behind the law into five options. Of those, the first four options are essentially pragmatic. The law may well have accomplished one or more of the pragmatic ends they identify, but only the fifth reason, “such a divorce and remarriage is a “polluting sin”\(^88\), adequately reflects the motivation recorded in the law itself.

The remarriage is an “abomination” (חטא) and it “brings sin upon the land”. The first of these terms is common in the Old Testament and deals with that which is repulsive either to God or man. The nature of the repulsion can be physical, ceremonial, or ethical. The word is quite often associated with idolatry\(^89\). The second phrase, יָהַעַתְא אֵת־הָאָרֶץ, is common as well, but its use here is unusual. Of the 32 occurrences of the verb in the hifil pattern, all but four concern a man (usually the king of Judah or Israel) or men leading another man (often the nation of Judah or Israel) into sin. Deut. 24:4 is unique in attributing the guilt to the land.

---


The exact terminology may be unique, but the underlying concept is present elsewhere. The reason God gave Abraham for the 400 year delay in his descendants inheriting the land is that “the iniquity of the Amorites was not complete.” (Gen. 15:16) In Lev. 18, the Israelites are warned to avoid sexual immorality. Failure to do so will result in their dispossession of the Land: “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.” (Lev. 18:24-25)

The modern conception of man owes more to Greek though than to Hebrew thought. According to H.L. Ellison, we tend to think of our bodies as giving us individuality and separating us one from another. In the Old Testament conception of the world, it is our flesh that unites us to our fellow men and binds us to the earth from which we were taken. If we can conceive of the Amorites as having a particular relationship to the land, and being capable of defiling it by their actions, how much more must this be the case for the children of Israel, who received the Land as part of their covenantal heritage from the Lord.

In a sense, the meaning of is quite clear. is broadly used in various passive forms in the Old Testament to indicate becoming ceremonially unclean or engaging in idolatry. The difficulty is in determining what causes the woman to become defiled. Two options present themselves. Either something about the first divorce itself constituted defilement or the second marriage is the cause of the defilement.

William Loader argues that the defilement refers to the woman “being made to declare herself unclean by the first husband” and that the defilement is synonymous with the indecent

---

matter which provoked the divorce\textsuperscript{91}. There is a certain degree of plausibility to this given the frequent use of נָשִׁית in Numbers 5 in a passage that deals with a husband’s suspicion of the wife’s infidelity. However, Numbers 5 does not deal with divorce, nor is there any other evidence that would point to the process of divorce involving a vow that she had committed some form of uncleanness on the part of the woman. Moreover, if the first divorce (or some sin that induced it) were the cause of defilement, we would expect reconciliation to be prohibited regardless of whether or not there was an intervening marriage. The cause of defilement must reside in the second marriage. Any attempt to explain the problem on the basis of polyandry is flawed, as the defilement remains even in the instance of the second husband’s death. However, it does not appear that the woman is defiled in regard to any other man. She could legally marry a third man, but she is forbidden from returning to the first husband.

**Cultural Background for the Reconciliation Metaphor**

Similarly, there is little cultural background regarding reconciliation. This is not surprising. In our own culture, cases of divorced couples reuniting are quite rare.

None of the literature I reviewed while doing the research for this thesis included any parallels to the reconciliation theme in ANE literature. The closest parallel is an excerpt from the Middle Assyrian laws which allowed a divorcing husband to reclaim his wife for five years, even if she had married in the meantime. This obviously disadvantaged the divorced woman in her attempts to find a new husband. It is frequently theorized that the practical basis for the

\textsuperscript{91}Loader, 73.
requirement for the certificate of divorce and the prohibition of returning to a prior husband in Deut. 24 was to protect Israelite women from a similar state of disadvantage.  

**Reconciliation in the Latter Prophets**

The latter prophets are replete with imagery concerning the renewal of relationship between Yahweh and His people. Let us examine a few of those in which the marriage metaphor features prominently.

**Hosea 2**

In 2:14ff, Hosea moves from estrangement to reconciliation. Does this consist of simply reinstating the previously broken covenant or instituting an entirely new covenant? 2:18 speaks of God instituting a covenant between Israel and the various forces of judgment which were the instruments of punishing national covenantal betrayal under the Mosaic covenant.

Chapter 2 ends with another promise of the reversal of the names of Hosea’s children (Jezreel, No Mercy, Not My People). Especially significant is the transition of Not My People to My People. In this reversal, there is an answer. In response to being called “My People”, Israel will acknowledge “You are my God.” This parallels the covenant declaration from Mt. Sinai and the people’s response in Exodus 19:5-6. Likely, this is what is intended by the promise that “she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.” (Ho 2:15) The echo of the _verbasolemnia_of the wedding ceremony (“You are my wife/You are my husband”) is likely intentional.

In 2:19, Yahweh speaks of his intention to betroth Israel to himself. This language only makes sense if the parties are no longer married and an entirely new marriage is in

---

92 Instone-Brewer, 30.
Yahweh is the only actor in this betrothal. Faced with Israel’s previous unrighteousness, injustice, and unfaithfulness, Yahweh must act to overcome them. Dearman suggests that the righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and mercy, and faithfulness are Yahweh’s betrothal gifts. He will give to Israel precisely those things that are necessary for her to fulfill her covenant obligations. If we have merely a resumption of the existing relationship, Israel is doomed to fail again. We have here early hints of the promise of a New Covenant which becomes explicit in Jeremiah 31 (where Israel is addressed as “virgin Israel”) – a covenant differing not so much in its terms as in the fact that its initiator provides the vassal all that is necessary for keeping the covenant.

Ray Ortlund suggests that this language reveals a profound mystery of grace. Yahweh’s promise goes beyond covenant renewal to something entirely new. “A fresh betrothal, as if Israel were starting out again as a pure virgin, is set before the nation as their future hope... The ugly past will be forgotten and they will start over again, as if nothing had ever gone wrong.”

Hosea 3

Hosea 3 offers a first person account of Hosea’s reconciliation with Gomer. A parallel is drawn to God’s love toward an undeserving people (Hos. 3:1). There is some debate about whether the woman Hosea loves in chapter 3 is Gomer or a new woman. The translation in the ESV (“go again”) could suggest a repetition of the initial act of taking a wife, but the adverb could just as logically be associated with the following verb and indicate extension, “keep on

---

93 Dearman, location 1623.
94 Ortlund, 70.
loving\textsuperscript{95}. A stronger consideration is that if the woman of chapter 3 is not Gomer, the parallel between Hosea’s marriage and God’s relationship to Israel is broken.

That Hosea purchases Gomer suggests that she has fallen into a condition of slavery. Exodus 21:32 suggests that the ordinary price of a slave was thirty shekels of silver. That Hosea purchases her fifteen shekels plus some barley may suggest that Hosea was poor\textsuperscript{96} or that her owner saw Gomer as having less than the standard value. Hosea establishes that she is to either dwell with him or wait for him for many days, abstaining from going after other men.

Hosea does not offer a clear answer as to whether or not his reconciliation with Gomer succeeded. The narrative ends much like the Jonah narrative.Implicitly, Israel is invited to conclude the narrative by their response to Yahweh’s offer of reconciliation. This same offer is more explicitly stated in the final chapter, where Hosea outlines for them what God is looking for in their repentance.

\textbf{Isaiah 54}

In Isaiah 54, Yahweh is again presented as husband, Redeemer, and God. His absolute authority over “the whole earth” is juxtaposed with the most intimate relationship. Isaiah references the estrangement between Yahweh and his people, but divorce is not brought into the picture. Rather, Israel is depicted as having been widowed (Isa 54:5) or deserted (Isa. 54:6).

The description of Israel as deserted (נִבְּלָד) is astonishing. The verb can mean to leave, to forsake, or to loose. It is used frequently of Israel, who is accused of forsaking her God (Deu.

\textsuperscript{96} Heflin, 18.
28:20; 31:16; Jdg. 10:10; Jer. 1:16). The word expresses the opposite of the covenant virtue of ח. When God is the subject, it is ordinarily a negative statement (e.g., Isa. 41:17, “I the God of Israel will not forsake them”).

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Isaiah 54 is that the prior sins of Israel are nowhere referred to. Yahweh refers to his anger at Israel, but in the context of this passage, he presents it almost as if it had no cause. As Elizbeth Darr puts it, it is as if Yahweh is “taking the blame” for the failure of the relationship. In place of anger, Yahweh promises compassion (Isa. 54:9), which He seals with an oath. He likens it to His oath not to again destroy the earth in the days of Noah. In the future, Yahweh’s ח is assured.

**Jeremiah 3**

The first five verses of Jeremiah 3 likely continue the speech begun in 2:4, which is largely a condemnation of Judah’s infidelity. In 3:1, the problem of reconciliation posed by Deut. 24 comes to the fore: “If a man divorces him wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted?” Strictly speaking, the law would not apply in this case, because Judah’s unfaithfulness with idols is never construed as a marriage to them. Rather, Jeremiah is making an a fortiori argument. If the case described in Deut. 24 would bring pollution on the land, how much more so would it bring pollution for a brazen harlot like Judah to return to Yahweh? Central to the issue is that the supposed return that Judah desires is nothing more than a pretense, presumably some

---

98 Darr, 66.
99 Davidson, 414.
continuation of her syncretistic idol worship rather than a wholehearted repudiation of it and consequent renewal of her faithfulness to Yahweh.

**Summary, Conclusions, and Reflection**

While the prophets each have their own emphases appropriate to their historical circumstances and audience, when one steps back and views the development of the metaphor across the Latter Prophets, a coherent story appears. Yahweh chose an orphaned girl as His bride. He gave her all that was necessary for her to develop into a woman who was renowned for her beauty, a woman who had not only all that was necessary for her life, but who enjoyed riches and luxury.

Sadly, rather than expressing thankful recognition for what she had received, she was filled with sensual desire and a fearful hunger for protection and provision. She frantically searched for all of that among her neighbors, who came to despise her. The metaphor is strained by the historical reality of the division of the kingdom, but the story developed in essentially the same way for both Israel and Judah – Yahweh’s anger was aroused and He sent his bride away.

The remarkable development in the story is that Yahweh’s anger subsides. He remembers His covenant, the very covenant that had been trampled by His faithless wife, and He pursues her. One of the last prophetic voices is that of Zechariah. Through him, Yahweh says, “I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city.” (Zec. 8:3) As it turns out, the post-exilic community was more faithful than their predecessors in many ways, but as Ezra, Nehemiah, Malachi, and the
intertestamental documents record, their tendency to defect from Yahweh and accommodate themselves to their neighbors remained. The fulfillment of the promise that Yahweh would take Israel as his spotless Bride and ensure that she would no longer fail him remained unfulfilled.

**New Testament Development of the Marriage Metaphor**

While the prophets develop the marital metaphor far beyond the hints in the Pentateuch, they do not have the last word. Both Paul and Jesus pick up on the metaphor. On the one hand, Jesus assumes the present reality of marriage between God and Israel. He describes the generation of Jews which witnessed His first coming as an “evil and adulterous generation” (Mat. 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:38) At first glance, it is surprising that Jesus would describe first century Jews in language that calls to mind the gross infidelity of pre-exilic Israel. In outward form, Jesus’ contemporaries were more faithful even than the post-exilic generation. However, Jesus aims his rebukes almost exclusively at the ostentatiously pious. Stripped to its heart, much of first century Judaism was just as faithless as Israel’s earlier sin. As Ortlund puts it, “The crudities of old-time Baalism had been sublimated into subtle, even respectable, forms of God-evasion.

At the same time, the “already, but not yet” dynamic of the Kingdom is in view with the marriage metaphor as well. Jesus describes himself as “the bridegroom” both directly (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19,20; Luke 5:34,35) and in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13). In the first case, the emphasis is on the presence of the bridegroom with wedding guests as a present reality. In the parable, the emphasis is on the wedding feast as an event yet to occur.

---

100 Ortlund, 137.
The epitome of the New Testament use of the metaphor occurs in Paul’s instructions to husbands and wives in Eph. 5:22-33. One might even say that Paul goes so far as to reverse the metaphor. Rather than marriage being a handy analogy for the union between Christ and the Church, that more fundamental and mysterious union is the foundation for understanding marriage. (Eph. 5:32) Because the human marriage expresses the mysterious union, the ethical implications of marriage (monogamy, exclusivity, permanence, and intimacy) are raised to new heights of significance. Although v.22 has attracted the most attention in commentary on the passage during the last 50 years, the majority of the ethical teaching in the passage is directed at the husband. This is because he has the responsibility of imaging the love that Christ demonstrates for His Church.

Elsewhere, Paul picks up on the same idea of this mysterious union to explain why sexual immorality is such a serious sin. In 1 Cor. 6, the corporate union becomes individual: “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?” (1 Cor. 6:15) Paul describes intercourse with a prostitute as being “joined” (κολλώμενος) to her. The word comes from the same root that is translated “hold fast” in Eph. 5:31 (quoting Gen. 2:24). For Paul, there is a hierarchy of union. Sexual union with a prostitute is a union of a sort, but it falls short of the intimacy intended in marriage. He describes it as becoming “one body” rather than “one flesh”. However, in the same context, union with Christ is presented as going beyond even the marital union. It is a “one spirit” union. (1 Cor. 6:17)

The final occurrence of the metaphor is in Revelation. Following the pouring out of the seventh bowl in chapter 16, the events of Revelation rush rapidly toward their culmination. Immediately prior to the judgment scene of chapter 20, the heavenly multitude rejoices.
because “the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure.” (Rev. 19:7-8) To this point in Revelation, the cries of the saints have been pleased for the Lord to act to vindicate His people. From this point forward, the saints cry joyful hallelujahs. The bride herself does not appear until chapter 21, when we see her as a city descending from heaven, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev. 21:2)

It is appropriate that there should be rejoicing at the presentation of a purified bride. At long last, the promises of the prophets are finding their ultimate fruition. Ortlund captures the momentous significance:

Unlike the failed marriage of Yahweh with harlotrous Israel, unlike the delicate betrothal of the fickle Corinthians, this perfect union brings together a triumphant Lamb and a pure Bride beyond the reach of hell and sin. She has prepared herself through faith, repentance, and steadfast endurance, ‘as becomes the bride who with joy awaits the coming of her bridegroom’. The hard path the church has taken to arrive at this moment has proved meaningful and fruitful, as she has been purified of all adulterous inclinations and is finally ready to give herself fully to her one Husband, and to no other, forever.\(^{101}\)

The prominence given to the marital metaphor at the very end of Scripture explains why marriage appears so prominently at the beginning. What might seem like a scribal gloss tacked onto the Eden narrative in chapter 2 is crucial to the entire story of Scripture. The institution of marriage provides and framework in which the story of Yahweh and His people unfolds.

\(^{101}\) Ortlund, 163.
Pastoral Consequences of the Marriage Metaphor

Marriage is a topic of perennial concern for pastors and their congregations. The Christian book store chain Lifeway currently carries 432 books on the topic of marriage. By way of contrast, the number of resources they carry for other topics that we might hope or expect to be of practical concern to believers is far less. For instance, they have fourteen resources on “sanctification”, 151 on “money”, 243 on “evangelism”, and 31 on “contentment”. I have not examined the product catalogs of other organizations that provide teaching materials to believers, but I suspect that there would be a similar strong emphasis on marriage. To some degree, this is appropriate. Marriage is a common situational element of congregants’ lives that must be addressed through the ministry of the Church. The vast majority of church attendees are married, divorced, or seeking to be married. I have not found any research on the number of people who believe they are called to singleness, but it is surely very small.

Despite the availability of teaching material, many Christians struggle in their marriages. Providing exact numbers is impossible. This is partly due to the difficulty of defining what “Christian” means when studies are done. Do we use self-identification, theological belief, church attendance, formal membership, etc.? How broadly do we draw the line for the study? Do we include members of mainline churches? What about Roman Catholics? Similarly, defining marital “success” is difficult. The two obvious criteria are avoidance of divorce and self-reported marital satisfaction. However, it is possible for believers to be in a marriage that succeeds along those criteria yet falls far short in terms of its ability to portray the relationship between God and His Church. For most pastors and sessions, what matters is not the big picture of how evangelical marriages are faring in America or their country, but the marriages
within their particular flock. With a determined effort to be involved in the lives of their flock, elders should be able prayerfully to determine the amount of focus that should be given to marriage within their ministries.

A Christian definition of successful marriage should be rooted in the Bible’s teaching about the purposes and structure of marriage and about the nature of married persons. As a working definition, I suggest that successful marriage is a covenanted union between a man and a woman that glorifies God by fulfilling the legitimate needs of the couple, increasing the number of godly human beings, and imaging the truth of the Gospel to their neighbors. Such a definition is broad enough that a pair of newly married recent converts could aspire to meet it to a degree appropriate to their spiritual maturity and knowledge of each other. However, it leaves room for growth – as spouses grow in their knowledge of Christ and each other, the marriage should produce greater fruit.

Paul’s development of the marital metaphor more so than other uses of it leads directly to its practical implications. For him, the connection between the Old Testament marital metaphor and our union with Christ makes the goal of deep marital union applicable and attainable, if not easy, for a Christian couple. The church’s marriage to Christ is both prefigured in Adam and Eve and provides a Christian couple with the personal wherewithal for achieving marital unity at a profound human level.¹⁰² Couples can and should be urged to monogamy, permanence, exclusivity, and intimacy in their relationships. While it isn’t wrong to point out the practical benefits to the couple of striving to obey the Lord in the context of their marriage, the foundational consideration that marriage demonstrates something about the nature of

¹⁰² Ortlund, 155.
God’s steadfast love and faithfulness must not be lost. That foundation transforms marriage from merely a common grace benefit for humanity to a vocation.

Moreover, the marital metaphor has implications for the unmarried. Almost every church includes members who are single and who desperately desire to be married. Understanding God’s purpose for marriage and how He conducts Himself in his marriage to His Bride will help them prepare for marriage. In the interim, and for those who are ultimately called to singleness, understanding Christ’s faithfulness and intimacy can be a balm for the pain of their loneliness.

Similarly, almost every church has members who are divorced. This includes both those who have been deserted and those who have turned their backs on their marriages. For the innocent victims, it is important to know that Christ regards marriage more highly than their former spouse. The promises of God that He will not forsake His People can be dear to those who have been forsaken. At the same time, having the knowledge that Yahweh divorced his unfaithful spouse can provide a degree of comfort for those who have been victims of infidelity or abandonment, but who are still legally married. Although far from mandatory, there may be situations where the wisest biblical counsel would be for them to legalize the divorce which is already a de facto reality.

For those who are the forsaking partner, the marriage metaphor is a sharp rebuke. One cannot claim to follow Christ and simultaneously act in a way that falsely portrays Him. To be a Christian who is an adulterer or an abandoner is to declare to the world that the love of Christ is fickle and selfish. Those who are divorced or divorcing without grounds should be made aware of the serious of their actions. We should counsel them to repent and to take whatever steps
toward reconciliation are possible in their circumstances. Failure to do so should lead to an exercise of church discipline.

Marriage is at once common and mysterious. None of the other relationship metaphors in Scripture (parent-child, master-slave, king-subject, etc.) possess the element of mystery. It is time that we subordinate our practical attempts to build marriages to the Glory that is revealed in them or obscured by them. It is my hope that this thesis will be a small step towards doing precisely that.
Bibliography


Hornsby, Teresa. “Israel Has Become a Worthless Thing: Re-reading Gomer in Hosea 1-3.” 


