



Scriptural Reflections on Marriage and Marital Love as Reflective of the Union of God and Israel and Christ and the Church

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On Love in the Old Testament

There is one general word for human “love” used throughout the Old Testament, whether speaking of concern, affection, sexual love, or friendship: *’ahabah*. Great emphasis is placed on the love *for* God. This love is the central proclamation of Jewish faith, and its primary statement is found in Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.” This prayer is recited daily by individuals and by the formal minyan of ten men who pray for the community each morning. It is carried as a written text in the phylacteries worn during prayer and placed in the mezuzah on the doors of Jewish homes. It is manifested in our obedience to God’s commands—see, for example, the Ten Commandments

in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21—and in “fear of the Lord,” that is, worshiping and acknowledging him alone—see, for example, Proverbs 1:7. But just as frequently, the Old Testament speaks of love that is directed toward one’s fellow Israelites and expressed primarily by helping one’s neighbor. A key text is Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” Other examples include the command to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner who lives among you (Ex 22:20-23, Ex 23:9, Lv 19:33, and Dt 10:18-19) and the testimonies found in many proverbs (Prv 11:26, 14:31, and 22:22) and psalms (Ps 15, 24:3-6, 37:25-28, 72:4, 72:12-14, and 112:9). Perhaps the greatest of all ancient love poems is the Song of Songs, with its sensuous description of two lovers.

A few passages insist that we must love even those who hate us (Ex 23:1-5 and Lv 19:17), but they apply only to other Israelites. No passage clearly states the command to love foreigners. The earliest examples occur in the deuterocanonical book of Tobit: "Do not turn your face away from any of the poor, and God's face will not be turned away from you" (Tb 4:7). "Do to no one what you yourself dislike" (Tb 4:15). They are negative versions of the golden rule of Jesus (Mt 7:12).

The word *'ahabah* can also be used of God's love toward us or for us, but this use is relatively rare. More often God's love is expressed by such words as *hesed*, his covenant loyalty; *hen*, his favor; *raham*, his compassion, or *'emunah*, his faithfulness. God's love for an individual is occasionally described in the Old Testament, as in the lengthy description of God's special relationship with Moses in Exodus 33:7-17. More often, God's love is directed to Israel as a whole or to certain types of people, such as the upright, the just, the poor, or those who hope in him. Although God is Lord of all peoples and cares for them (Ex 19:3-6), his special love is given to Israel. He is their father and Israel is his firstborn (Ex 4:22) and his beloved son (Dt 14:1, Is 1:2, and Hos 11:1). As father, God created them and protects them (Dt 32:6-9). Other images in the Old Testament capture God's love as well: he is their shepherd (Ps 23 and Ez 34), their warrior (Ex 15 and Is 63), and their healer (Hos 6:1-3, Hos 11:3, Is 6:10, Is 30:26, and Jer 3:22).

Key to understanding the special love that God shows Israel is the fact that he chose her, calling Abraham and promising him and his descendants

blessing forever (Gn 12:1-3, 15:1-6, and 17:4-8). He renews that promise over and over (Gn 28:13-15 and 35:9-12, Jer 31:1-3 and 33:19-21, and Ez 36:24-28 and 37:23-28). These promises are expressed as "covenants" between God and people, a model borrowed from forms of ancient treaties between kings, in which the loyalty of a nation to its overlord is guaranteed by the mutual "love" pledged between the leaders. Israel used this model to express its fidelity to God. Central to this covenant relationship was awareness that God chose Israel to be not just a subject people, but a spouse, partner, and friend with whom he would communicate and make himself known and to whose prayers and needs he would promise to be available. This is captured in a series of tender scenes in the Pentateuch such as Exodus 19:3-8 and 33:7-17, Leviticus 26:1-13, and Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and 32:1-14, and in such prophetic texts as Hosea 2:16-25, Isaiah 43:1-14, Jeremiah 14:17-21, Daniel 9:17-19, and Nehemiah 9:7-15. All these passages recall the Lord's mercy and love and acknowledge Israel's frequent unfaithfulness in the partnership.

On Love in the New Testament

The New Testament clearly builds on the Old Testament understanding of love. Jesus echoes the pentateuchal and prophetic traditions when he insists on the equal importance of both love of God and love of neighbor (Mt 22:34-40). But he extends this obligation of love to all peoples, not just to fellow members of the faith. When asked who would be a neighbor,

he responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37). He goes even further when he insists that love must include our enemies and those who hate us (Mt 5:43-48) and that forgiveness stands as the test of love (Mt 5:23-26, 6:9-15, and 18:21-35; Mk 2:1-12 and 11:24-26; and Lk 7:36-50). Referring to Isaiah 53, he makes forgiveness of sin the reason for giving his life for others (Mt 26:28). Finally, Jesus teaches that the heart of love is union with God when he emphasizes his special relationship of love with his Father, so that “no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him” (Mt 11:27).

Paul adds several key insights to this love command at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. Paul’s striking meditation on love in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 stresses that only love lasts forever and links us to our heavenly destiny with God (1 Cor 13:13). His Letter to the Romans is constructed as the story of divine love that brings all people salvation. In chapters 1 to 4, he outlines the state of sin that prevents us from being right with God. In chapter 5, he goes on to say that the “love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us. For Christ, while we were still helpless yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly” (Rom 5:5-6). Two verses later he adds, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). In chapters 6 through 8, he shows how that love comes to us through the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. His ringing conclusion comes in Romans 8:38-39: “I am

convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

St. John’s first letter is an extended reflection on the love of God. In chapters 1 and 2 of 1 John, he insists that the love of God is found in obedience to God’s commands, and anyone who loves the world more than God does not know God. In chapters 3 and 4, he reflects on love of neighbor and urges, “Let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God” (1 Jn 4:7). Finally, in 1 John 4:16, John offers us the most famous of all Christian images of love: “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.” This love is also eternal life for all who believe and live it (1 Jn 5:13).

On Marriage Imagery for Love

Little is said in the Old Testament of the actual rituals and legal requirements for marriage. Generally the family, especially the father, arranged a girl’s marriage with the groom’s family. There are indications that the groom had to present gifts to the bride’s father, but the father of the bride also had to provide his daughter with a dowry to help support her if her husband died. In early times, polygamy was often practiced (see, for example, Abraham in Genesis 16:1-4; Jacob in Genesis 29:28-35; David in 2 Samuel 5:13-16; Solomon in 1 Kings 11:1-3). However, Genesis 2:23-24 idealizes a monogamous relationship,

and there seem to be no examples of polygamy after the time of the Exile in the sixth century BC.

Spiritually, fidelity is at the heart of marital love. It is the essential quality demanded of husbands and wives in key biblical passages such as Hosea 1-3, Ezekiel 16 and 23, Psalm 128, Proverbs 6:20-29, and Sirach 23:22-27. A loving marriage bears fruit in many children, who form a tight-knit family that cares for parents in their old age. Deuteronomy 24:1 permits divorce when necessary, but the ideal of Genesis 2 envisions a permanent relationship without divorce (Gn 2:21-24). Jesus cites Genesis 2 when he forbids all divorce and thus invalidates the command of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1 (Mt 5:31-32 and 19:1-12). Paul, too, wrestles with the difficulties of marriage, but he argues against divorce unless the Christian party is being persecuted for his or her faith (1 Cor 7:1-16).

The ideals of faithfulness, permanence, and fruitfulness that characterize married love are employed by the prophets to show the depth of God's covenantal love. That love goes beyond the traditional treaty language about brotherhood to establish an enduring love for Israel whom God has chosen to be his spouse and partner forever. Hosea is the first to use this imagery to describe relations with the unfaithful wife in Hosea 1 and 3, and he explicitly contrasts this to God's love for Israel in chapter 2. This love is also touchingly pictured in Isaiah 54:5-8 and 62:4-5, sets the theme for Jeremiah in Jeremiah 2:1-3 and 3:20-22, and is graphically portrayed in Ezekiel 16 and 23. If a covenant treaty

between kings was a pledge of their loyalty and friendship, how much the greater is the loyalty and friendship God shows in his love for Israel.

The New Testament develops this love of God for Israel to express the love of Christ for the Church. In different places in the Gospels, for example, in Mark 2:19-20 and John 3:28-30, Jesus is portrayed as the Bridegroom. Paul says he has presented his converts as spouses to Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:2. In Ephesians 5:21-33, he reflects on the unity of Christ with the Church as the source of the unity of the human couple. Just as God planned to give his Son as one with humanity from the beginning of creation ("the great mystery" of Eph 5:32), so humans were created with the potential for enduring love within them (Gn 2:23-24). Thus, marriage is ideally a mirror of the love revealed by Christ when he gave his life completely for others. As Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 13, married love always sacrifices itself for the partner. Not all are called to marriage, but married life stands as a unique vocation with the obligation to witness divine love. The witness of marriage strengthens the entire Christian community in mutual love as Paul indirectly affirms in Colossians 3:12-21 and throughout his letters to Rome, Philippi, and Corinth. The Book of Revelation also uses spousal imagery, speaking of the "wedding feast of the Lamb," where Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church, the New Jerusalem, is his Bride (see Rv 19:6-9; 21:1-2, 9-14; and 22:17).

God's Love and Married Love in Church Teaching

The Second Vatican Council addressed the question of marriage in chapter 1 of its document *Gaudium et Spes* (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*). The institution of marriage is part of God's plan in creation itself (Gn 1:26-31 and 2:18-24), and Christ gave it special sanctity by making it a sacrament of God's love. In both Genesis and Jesus' teaching, marriage is a covenant of irrevocable consent between two people. The attraction of the man and woman for one another will not guarantee that love will last lifelong, for love also needs God and his covenant grace as a partner. For followers of Jesus, this covenant fidelity of the Sacrament of Matrimony is revealed by the love of Christ for his Church. No marriage becomes a full unity of two hearts and minds without recognizing that if God is love, then the deepest and truest love can only be achieved by living in unity with God's will. It requires replacing self-love and indulgence with love for the other through service, gentle affection, generosity of spirit, active deeds, and mutual help.

For the Christian, marriage is a process of growing and deepening in love, nurtured by the Spirit of Christ that daily permeates and suffuses the lives of a couple with faith, hope, and love. Being active in prayer and the life of the Church as witness to Christ helps marriages grow and deepen and forms a supportive context for the education and formation of children to become mature and responsible adults. Paul constantly reminds his

converts that they must live "in Christ." One cannot serve two masters, both the values of the world and the values of God (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). To live in Christ is a permanent commitment to imitating Christ in accord with his teaching. Marriage as life in Christ is a three-way covenant of two persons with Christ and is intimately connected with the presence of Christ and his Holy Spirit in the Church as a community living in and proclaiming divine love.

The Scriptures frequently stress conjugal love, for example, Genesis 2:20-24; Proverbs 5:15-20 and 31:1-31; Tobit 8:4-8; Song of Songs 1:1-3, 1:16, 4:16, 5:1, and 7:8-14; and 1 Corinthians 7:3-6. The Church reflects this with a wide selection of biblical readings offered for the Sacrament of Matrimony and the Rite of Marriage. The readings reflect two major focal points. For some, marriage is compared to the divine covenant: Genesis 1:26-31 and 2:18-24; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 19:3-6; Romans 8:31-39; Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:12-17; and 1 Peter 3:1-9. For others, emphasis is given to living married life as an expression of God's love: Genesis 24:48-67; Tobit 7:9-15 and 8:5-7; Song of Songs 2:8-16 and 8:6-7; Sirach 25:1-4; Matthew 5:1-12, 5:13-16, 7:21-29, and 22:35-40; Mark 10:6-9; John 2:1-11, 15:9-12, 15:12-16, and 17:20-26; 1 Corinthians 6:13-15 and 13:1-13; 1 John 3:18-24 and 4:7-12; and Revelation 19:1-9.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church's emphasis on marriage has been expressed much more in the spiritual categories of salvation, grace, and divine promise than in the language of legal contracts. By

choosing the language of the Scriptures rather than canon law to redefine marriage, the Church avoids the appearance of stressing the need to merely hold on through the problems of married life and instead positively encourages couples to develop their relationship with Christ in order to turn difficulties into opportunities of loving concern and

reject any indulgent self-love as the basis of their union. Through prayer, they may be assured that their marriage can survive and flourish, because it participates in the saving power of the covenant bond between God and Israel, Christ and the Church.

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