

## **Marriage and Covenant: Reflections on the Theology of Marriage**

Loron Wade  
Montemorelos University

Marriage is presented in Scripture both as a covenant and as a covenant metaphor. That is, marriage is itself a covenant. Furthermore, the parallels between the marriage pact and God's covenant with Israel are so striking that marriage is used as a theological metaphor that both clarifies and is clarified by the meaning of the divine covenant.

Therefore, in this approach to understanding the theology of marriage, we will consider first the Biblical idea of covenant itself, and then we will consider some of the striking parallels that Scripture presents between the marriage covenant and the salvation covenant.

### **The Covenant**

The covenant was a mutual choosing; it was a reciprocal promise of exclusive dedication and loyalty. In essence it said: "I will be their God; they will be my people" (Jer 31:31–34; also Ezek 11:20; 14:11; Zech 8:8; etc.).

The covenant with Abraham was ratified in a solemn ceremony with shedding of blood (Gen 15:1–21). It was subsequently renewed to Isaac (Gen 17:19) and to Jacob (Gen 28:11–15; 32:24–30). It was validated to each succeeding generation through the rite of circumcision (Gen 17:11). It was announced to Israel at Sinai (Exod 19:3–6), its terms were spelled out in the giving of the law, and then it was ratified by the sprinkling of blood (Exod 24:7, 8). It was renewed again at the end of the forty years in the wilderness (Deut 29:1–25).

In all of this the Lord was speaking to His people in terms that would be clear to their understanding and in harmony with the culture of the age in which they lived. They understood that the covenant gave them a situation of privilege and also placed them under solemn obligation.

The following are aspects of what the covenant meant to the Israelites.

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### **Covenant Means Chosen-ness**

Here is how the covenant is introduced at Sinai: “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine” (Exod 19:5).<sup>1</sup>

The polytheists of that time believed in territorial gods. They thought that Yahweh might be the God here, but over there it was Chemosh, and farther along maybe Marduk or Osiris. It was the custom for travelers when entering the territory of a different people group to stop and offer a sacrifice to the dominant deity.

But Yahweh, the Creator of the universe, rejects this idea. “All the earth is mine,” He says.<sup>2</sup> This is His way of saying that He was not limited in His choice of a people. Nevertheless, He says, “If you will keep my covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples of the earth.” The significance of this choosing is magnified in the light of all the options God has at His disposal. Later he tells them, “The LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto Himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6).<sup>3</sup> “You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2).

In its best expression, the concept of chosen-ness filled the believer with a sense of awe and humble gratitude to God.<sup>4</sup>

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath [covenant] which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut 7:7, 8)

### **Covenant Means Belonging**

Modern western ontology,<sup>5</sup> captive to the Greek mind set, places a heavy emphasis on individuality. Each person is conceived of as an island, distinct and isolated from all the rest.<sup>6</sup> But the Hebrews derived their sense of personal identity from the covenant through which they saw themselves as members of the family of Abraham.

We sometimes speak of “corporate solidarity,” which is somewhat the modern equivalent of tribal loyalty. For us, the term probably means identification

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<sup>1</sup> With one or two exceptions, Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

<sup>2</sup> “For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains, and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof” (Ps 50:10–12; cf. Ps 24:1).

<sup>3</sup> See also 1 Kgs 8:53.

<sup>4</sup> In its worst expression, it gave them a sense of arrogance and disdain for other people.

<sup>5</sup> Ontology: A study of the nature of being.

<sup>6</sup> Current existentialist philosophy pushes the isolation even farther.

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with a group or a cause. In any case, we see the bond as strictly psychological. But for the Hebrew it had a physical dimension, as well.

We get a glimpse of this from reading Hebrews 7, where the apostle is arguing for the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood over the Levitical system. Here he tells us that Levi himself paid tithes to Melchizedek. How could that be when Levi lived many centuries after Melchizedek? To the Hebrew mind it was simple, because Levi was present in the loins of Abraham when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the apostle Paul tells us that “in Adam, all die” (1 Cor 15:22). How could all of us have died in Adam? Because we were all there; we were present in his body when he fell. Thus we all participated in the effects of his sin.

The Lord said to Abraham, “Kings shall come out of thy loins” (Gen 35:11). Abraham was to engender kings. They might be many generations away, but they were already there in his body as the Lord spoke with him.

In the same way, every time an Israelite recited the words of the covenant, he understood it was for him personally,<sup>8</sup> because he was there; he was present in the loins of Abraham when the covenant was given.<sup>9</sup>

There is no indication that the apostles thought the Gospel dispensation had changed all this or that the Gospel was somehow bringing in a new way of salvation. They understood that the Lord was opening the gates of salvation to the Gentiles, but these converts were not new plants in God’s garden; they were branches grafted into the trunk of Israel (Rom 11:11–21).

Thus, Paul tells the Gentile believers that they were once “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,” but now, through Christ, they are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people, members of the family of God” (Eph 2:12,

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<sup>7</sup> “And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him” (Heb 7:9, 10). To us this language seems metaphorical, but it is difficult to know the extent to which the Israelites would have taken it literally. Certainly, without Abraham as an ancestor, Levi would never have existed, so it is fair to say that in a way Levi was present in Abraham’s loins.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. John Donne: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” (from *Devotions on Emergent Occasions*, Meditation XVII).

<sup>9</sup> John the Baptist showed his awareness of this way of thinking when he told the Jewish leaders, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’” (Luke 3:8). The Jews felt nothing could shake their hold on salvation because they were children of Abraham.

According to this understanding, descendants were extensions of the self, a perpetuation of one’s own life. This clarifies the extreme importance of fertility in the Hebrew mind and why sterility was viewed with such horror. To have descendants was to achieve a kind of immortality. The levirate marriage in which a man was required to raise up children for a brother who died childless is another illustration of this idea. (“Levirate” comes from the Heb. *levir*, “brother-in-law.”)

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19). “If you belong to Christ,” he says, “then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29).

**Covenant Means Separation, That Is, “Separate-ness”**

The covenant also imparted a sense of separation, that is, of separate-ness. It established the Hebrews as a people who were distinct and separate from all other people of the earth. This idea of separate-ness, of course, is the counterpart to the idea of belonging.

**Separate-ness Is the Exclusive Worship of One God.** In the pantheon of the pagan religions, there was always room for one more, but the Creator God would brook no rivals. The first injunction of the covenant was: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” In the second injunction, He describes himself as “a jealous God” (Exod 20:3, 5). Complete separation from all other gods must be unconditional.

**Separate-ness Is Holiness.** The idea of separate-ness was the progenitor of the concept of holiness. It was the concept of separate-ness that determined the Hebrew understanding of holiness and made it a vital force in the people’s lives. The Hebrews’ exclusive devotion to God was expressed not merely by words and rituals, but by a lifestyle that set them apart.<sup>10</sup>

**Separate-ness Is Transcendence.** A fundamental concept of conservative theology is that God is transcendent. This means He is separate from what He has created. Pantheism, often expressed in creature worship, was and still is a common denominator of pagan religion.<sup>11</sup> Pantheism confuses the Creator with the creation by limiting Him to space/time dimensions, thus robbing Him of His infinity.<sup>12</sup>

**Transcendence and Holiness.** To say that God is transcendent is another way of expressing His holiness, and to say that God is holy is another way of expressing this transcendence.

As God is holy, so He commanded His people to be holy. Belonging to God can be accomplished only by separating from all that stands in opposition to Him. It is clear that a life style that destroys what He has created is in opposition to Him. Thus, God’s people were to live in a way that would set them apart, distinct and separate from the creature-worshipping, thing-worshipping masses. They were to transcend popular culture. They were a “holy nation.”<sup>13</sup>

The Gentiles might eat all manner of creatures, but God’s chosen people could not. Why? We commonly think of the dietary laws given in Leviticus 11 as a series of health principles. Indeed they are, but it is interesting to note that

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<sup>10</sup> 2 Cor 6:17; Rev 18:4.

<sup>11</sup> “For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom 1:25). Liberal theology teaches a sophisticated form of this ancient doctrine known as immanence.

<sup>12</sup> This is, in fact, the opposite of what its proponents allege.

<sup>13</sup> Exod 19:6.

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health is not mentioned in the entire chapter. There is not a word about long life, being strong, avoiding disease, or anything of the sort. Notice the reason given for abstaining from unclean foods: “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am holy” (Lev 11:44, 45).

They were not told to follow these laws to be healthy, but to be holy.

Similarly, the Gentiles might eat the flesh of an animal that died of itself, but God’s people must not eat it. Why? Because “you are a holy people to the Lord your God” (Deut 14:12).

The Gentiles might live in the midst of unsanitary conditions, but God’s people were to bury their filth. Why? Because “the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp . . . therefore your camp must be holy” (Deut 23:14).

Thus separate-ness, as it is prescribed in the covenant, both signified and deepened holiness.

#### **Covenant Means Knowledge of God**

Biblical epistemology<sup>14</sup> also points up another sharp contrast between the theology of relationships and the Greek/pagan point of view. According to the Greeks, knowledge is a matter of getting information into your head,<sup>15</sup> or to put it a bit more elegantly, it is the apprehension of ultimate reality.<sup>16</sup>

But in Hebrew thought, as reflected in the Old Testament, not only the means but the nature of knowledge is different. Here “knowledge” (*yada*) is not so much informational as relational.<sup>17</sup> It is not only intellectual but experiential. What this means is that one cannot be uninvolved<sup>18</sup> with what one knows.

The Psalmist writes, “the Lord *knows* the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish” (Ps 1:6). The Lord’s knowledge of the righteous means for them the opposite of what will happen to the wicked. It is clear that God’s “knowing” does not imply that he is simply aware of His people or informed about them. It carries the idea of fellowship and concern, protection and caring. It means He is involved in their lives. So God’s knowledge of a person means His providence and the carrying out of His good purposes toward that person.<sup>19</sup>

It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that the idea of knowledge is closely related to the covenant. On a personal level, it is tied in with God’s

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<sup>14</sup> Epistemology: A study of the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> Knowledge might be achieved by rational contemplation, as with the Aristotelians, or by a sudden breakthrough of inner illumination, as with the followers of Plato, but in either case the nature of knowledge is the same.

<sup>16</sup> R. Bultman, “*Ginosko*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:689ff.

<sup>17</sup> Knowledge “connotes experience rather than contemplation or ecstasy” (George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 261).

<sup>18</sup> It also means that for human beings, there is no such thing as truly objective knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> E. C. Blackman, “Know,” *Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1950, 1962), 122.

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choosing of an individual to serve Him. The Lord told Jeremiah: “Before I formed you in the womb I *knew* you” (Jer 1:5). On a national scale, God’s knowledge of Israel meant His election of that nation as His chosen people. He says: “You only have I known among all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2).<sup>20</sup> Obviously, this cannot mean that the Lord had no information about other people groups; it means that with no other nation did God have the same relation of fellowship and concern.

Similarly, in the NT<sup>21</sup> we read that those who have not done the will of the heavenly Father will one day hear the words: “I never knew you” (Matt 7:23). The Lord is certainly not telling these people that He had no information about them. What He is saying is: You and I were never on that kind of terms. There was never a close relationship of love, concern, and obedience.

John presents Jesus as sent by God to bring mankind to a knowledge of Him. No man has seen God at any time, but Jesus has seen Him, and because of this intimate knowledge of (that is, relationship with) the Father, Jesus is able to mediate knowledge of the Father to humankind (John 1:18; 14:7; cf. John 18:37). The Saviour’s mission was to glorify the Father by making known His name on earth (John 17:6). “And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

#### **Covenant Means Faithfulness and Steadfast Love**

The relationship between the covenant partners is expressed by *hesed*, a term that refers especially to love-inspired loyalty and faithfulness (KJV, lovingkindness; RSV, steadfast love; NEB, love, loyalty, constancy) to the terms of the covenant.

The Psalmist sang: “the lovingkindness [*hesed*] of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep His covenant, and who remember His precepts to do them” (Ps 103:17, 18). Isaiah was no less poetic when he wrote: “For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness [*hesed*] will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken” (Isa 54:10).<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Creator pledged Himself to be faithful to the covenant promises, and He always was.

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<sup>20</sup> See also Hosea 5:3.

<sup>21</sup> Although the NT writers used the same vocabulary employed by the pagan philosophers, it is striking to note the clear continuity of the OT thought patterns. Nowhere is the relationship of the New Testament to the Old illustrated more clearly than in the degree to which the NT view of knowledge reflects OT thinking and stands in marked contrast to the epistemological formulations of Greek philosophy.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Isa 55:3. Vernard Eller suggests that *hesed* is best translated by George Matheson’s hymn title, “Oh Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” (“Covenantal Sex and Marriage: A Biblical View,” <http://www.hccentral.com/eller1/covsex.html>).

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The response of God's people was to be equally firm and fervent, though in actuality the Israelites frequently sinned against the covenant and had to ask forgiveness and reaffirm their commitment to it.<sup>23</sup> The Lord told Israel plainly that covenant loyalty meant that they were to "walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out" (Isa 26:3).

On the other hand, He warned, "If you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments; if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, *and so break My covenant*, I, in turn, will do this to you: . . ." (Lev 26:15, 16; emphasis added).

Notice that commandment breaking is here the equivalent of covenant breaking.

In a similar vein, we read in Exod. 34:28 that Moses "wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments." Here the ten commandments are identified directly with the covenant.

#### **Whoever Breaks the Covenant Ceases to Be a Beneficiary of its Provisions**

The Lord promised that *He* would never break the terms of the covenant (Judg 2:1; Ps 89:34), but He foretold that Israel would break it and specified how this would take place: "For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant" (Deut 31:20).

Whoever broke a covenant stepped outside its terms and ceased to be a beneficiary of its promises. The review of the covenant in Leviticus 26 is marked by three "if" clauses:

The first one, "**If** you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out" (v. 3), is followed by a series of blessings that were God's part of the covenant terms.

Next we read: "But **if** you do not obey Me and do not carry out all these commandments, if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, . . ." (vv. 14, 15), then a series of curses will replace the promised covenant blessings.

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<sup>23</sup> K. Baltzer studied ancient covenants in the ancient Near East and concluded that there were six essential elements in covenant formulary: (1) the preamble mentioning the names of the partners; (2) a preliminary history of the relationship of those entering the covenant; (3) a basic declaration about the future relationship of the partners; (4) details of the new relationship; (5) an invocation of the respective gods worshipped by both sides to act as witnesses; (6) a pronouncement of curse and blessings (*The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, 1971, cited by Joachim Guhr, "Covenant," *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986] 1:365–376).

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The third “if” clause foresees the possibility of repentance and restoration: “If they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers, in their unfaithfulness which they committed against Me, . . . then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and My covenant with Abraham as well, and I will remember the land” (vv. 41, 42).

Our God is a God of new beginnings. A broken covenant can be renewed if the parties agree to return to the original terms. In fact, through Isaiah, He promises a renewal and the establishment of a new and everlasting covenant (Isa 55:3).

Jeremiah echoes this same promise:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jer 31:31–34; also Ezek 11:20; 14:11; Zech 8:8; etc.)

### **Marriage and Covenant**

As we noted at the beginning, marriage is presented in Scripture both as a covenant and as a covenant symbol. It is a covenant in and of itself. And it is used as a theological metaphor to clarify and illustrate the meaning of the divine covenant.

#### **Marriage as Covenant**<sup>24</sup>

Scripture does not prescribe specific rites for enacting the marriage covenant. Apparently in early times it was an extremely simple matter, as we read about the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah: “Then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and he took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (Gen 24:67).

Genesis 29:22 suggests a wedding feast was given by the bride’s father (see also Judg 14:12; John 2:1–11). From Genesis 34:12 we learn that the marriage sometimes involved payment of a “bride price” (*mohar*) or dowry.

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<sup>24</sup> “The family tie is the closest, the most tender and sacred, of any on earth. It was designed to be a blessing to mankind. And it is a blessing wherever the marriage covenant is entered into intelligently, in the fear of God, and with due consideration for its responsibilities” (Ellen G. White, *The Christian Home*, p. 18).

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Whether a public ceremony was involved or not, marriage was considered a binding covenant. Malachi declared: “The Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal 2:14).

The fact that Moses specified a “certificate of divorce” for dissolving marriage (Deut 24:1) is further evidence that the marriage covenant was a publicly recognized commitment.

And we have evidence that, at least by intertestamental times, a written contract was involved:

Then he called his daughter Sarah, and taking her by the hand he gave her to Tobias to be his wife, saying, “Here she is; take her according to the law of Moses, and take her with you to your father, and he blessed them. Next he called his wife Edna, and took a scroll and wrote out the contract; and they set their seals to it. Then they began to eat. (Tobit 7:13ff)

#### Marriage as a Covenant Metaphor<sup>25</sup>

**Giving the Covenant Is a Betrothal.** Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord compared the giving of the covenant to Israel to a betrothal. He says: “I spread my skirt over you . . . I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became mine, declares the Lord God” (16:14). Through Hosea the Lord told His people: “And I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord” (Hos 2:19, 20).

Paul tells the believers in Corinth: “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2).

**Keeping the Covenant Is a Marriage.** In speaking of His own covenant faithfulness, the Lord told Israel that He had been a “husband” to them (Jer 31:32; see also Isa 54:5).

In the Gospels marriage is a symbol of the kingdom (Matt 25:1–13; Luke 14:16–24).

In his discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5, the apostle cites Genesis 2:24: “For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh.” Then he adds, “but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.”

In a similar vein, we hear in the book of Revelation an invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb whose bride is the New Jerusalem, the church (Rev 19:7–9).

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<sup>25</sup> “In the Bible, the sacred and enduring character of the relation that exists between Christ and His church is represented by the union of marriage. The Lord has joined His people to Himself by a solemn covenant, He promising to be their God, and they pledging themselves to be His and His alone” (Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 381).

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**Unfaithfulness Is Adultery and Can Result In Divorce.** Following the marriage metaphor, when God's people are unfaithful to the covenant, this is frequently compared to adultery: "For all the adulteries of faithless Israel, I had sent her away and given her a writ of divorce, yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear; but she went and was a harlot also" (Jer 3:8; see also Exod 34:15; Deut 31:16; Judg 2:17).

The entire book of Hosea is dedicated to depicting God's relationship with His people through the marriage/harlotry metaphor.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in the book of Revelation, Babylon, the unfaithful church, is depicted as a harlot and the mother of harlots (Rev 17:5, 15).

**Parallels Between Marriage and Covenant**

As we have considered some of the highlights of covenant theology, no doubt you have been impressed with some of the striking similarities between the covenant and marriage. We will now notice how Scripture itself draws out these similarities.

**Chosen-ness.** In the Song of Songs, the young women of the city ask the bride: "What is thy beloved more than another beloved, O thou fairest among women? What is thy beloved more than another beloved?" (5:9).

It is a challenge, but the bride does not hesitate. She *knows* the answer: Her beloved is "outstanding among ten thousand" (v. 10). Among all the thousands, she has chosen him even as he has chosen her the "fairest among women."

**Belonging.** We saw that the covenant pointed to a relationship that was more than a psychological attachment; it was physical because God's people were physically present in the loins of Abraham when the covenant was given. Children were considered a physical extension of their parents. It seems hardly anything could be stronger than the tie between parents and children. But we find that there is indeed something stronger: the union of a husband and wife.

After Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs, Adam sang, in his joy:

This is now bone of my bones,  
And flesh of my flesh;  
She shall be called Woman,  
Because she was taken out of Man. (Gen 2:23)

Now that is belonging! Eve is an extension of Adam's immediate person; she is his other self. It was a relationship closer than any other human relationship could ever be.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Hosea 1:2, 3; 2:5.

<sup>27</sup> Although this union is closer than any other human relationship, it does not destroy individuality. "I was shown that although a couple were married, gave themselves to each other by a most solemn vow in the sight of heaven and holy angels and the two were one, yet each had a separate identity which the marriage covenant could not destroy" (Ellen White, Letter 9, 1864).

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In the next verse we read: “For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”

The importance of this short statement is such that we must analyze it in more detail:

“*For this cause . . .*” “*Therefore . . .*” This means that the incident just related (the creation of Eve from one of Adam’s ribs) is explicitly precedent-setting. It serves to explain the mystery and the meaning of marriage.

“*A man shall leave his father and his mother.*” As we have noted, the eastern relationship between a man and his parents goes beyond what is generally understood in western culture. A man was considered a physical extension of his parents, as descendants were thought to be present in the body of their ancestors.

But here the text tells us that even this extremely close relationship is to be left behind, superseded by the relationship between a husband and wife. In forming a marriage relationship, a man would “leave his father and his mother.”

“*And shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.*” This cleaving and this becoming one flesh points to a degree of intimacy that is unparalleled in human experience.<sup>28</sup> It refers to a mental and spiritual union of which the sexual union is an expression and reaffirmation.

Sexual intimacy expresses and epitomizes the marriage covenant because it involves physically joining one body with another. Thus, it is a ritual of reenactment, recalling the creation of woman from the body of man.<sup>29</sup> In the exultant joy of the sexual act we hear an echo of the voice of Adam when he said: “This is now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh.”<sup>30</sup>

“*And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.*” Walter Trobisch writes:

Naked is not meant here in a physical sense only. It means to stand in front of each other, stripped and undisguised, without pretension, without hiding anything, seeing the partner as he or she really is and showing myself to him or her as I really am—and still not to be ashamed.<sup>31</sup>

This is a beautiful thought, even though it goes beyond the letter of the text. Trobisch is pointing to the depths of intimacy in marriage.

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<sup>28</sup> “The literal sense of the Hebrew word for ‘to cleave’ is to stick to, to paste, to be glued to a person. Husband and wife are glued together like two pieces of paper. If you try to separate two pieces of paper which are glued together, you tear them both” (Walter Trobisch, *I Married You* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 15).

<sup>29</sup> Thus the sexual union functions in a way that is similar to the ordinance of foot washing, which is a reenactment and reaffirmation of baptism, the act by which we enter the spiritual covenant in the Christian dispensation.

<sup>30</sup> Both Jesus and Paul cite Gen 2:24 and reaffirm its theological significance (Matt 19:4–8; 1 Cor 6:16, 17; Eph 5:31).

<sup>31</sup> Trobisch, 82, 83

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However, he apparently overlooks the fact that this nakedness was exclusively a pre-fall condition. The innocence of our first parents made such total intimacy possible. Sadly, the entrance of sin brought about a fundamental change. As long as the sinful nature is not taken away, 100% intimacy is not possible. Total sharing of every thought, absolute revealing of the most intimate secrets of the soul is not truly possible even between marriage partners, nor would it be kind or beneficial or healthy.

This, of course, does not contradict the fact that marriage, even under sin, is the closest of all human relations.

**Separate-ness.** It may seem paradoxical that union requires separation. But a marriage involves both uniting and separating.

We have already noticed that it involves the separation of a man from his parents. In view of the exceedingly close nature of the parent-child relationship, we might ask why marriage cannot be *in addition* to the parent-child relationship, but it cannot. Rather, marriage is formed by breaking off, by abandoning and leaving.<sup>32</sup> So cleaving requires leaving (Gen 2:24).<sup>33</sup>

**Separateness Implies Exclusiveness.** If leaving one's parents is demanded, how much more does marriage demand a breaking off of all other intimate relationships? In fact, Jesus made it clear that the exclusiveness demanded by the seventh commandment embraces even our thoughts (Matt 5:27, 28).

In this transcending or standing apart from all other human relationships, marriage achieves and defines its holiness. It is holy matrimony because it is a sanctuary, a holy ground where only the partners may tread.<sup>34</sup>

The transcendence of the marriage relationship requires the Christian to transcend also the confused mores of popular culture. The Christian who follows the Biblical command to "abstain from sexual immorality" is thereby placed in sharp contrast with the "Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thes 4:3-5).<sup>35</sup> By abstaining "from fleshly lusts which war against the soul," God's people become

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<sup>32</sup> "Leave" is from the Heb. *azab*, meaning "abandon, forsake." The word is frequently employed to describe Israel's forsaking Yahweh for false gods (Deut 28:20; Judg 10:13; 2 Chr 34:25; Isa 1:4; etc.). It is true, of course, that Israelite young people, in general, seem to have lived near one or both sets of parents after marriage, usually the man's parents, but there was a separation, none the less, even if only moving into a separate tent.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26).

<sup>34</sup> The discovery of group dynamics has brought into existence intensive group sessions demanding of participants total unreserved intimacy. A frequently-heard comment after such sessions is: "I've said things here I would never say even to my wife." It is not hard to see this as a violation of the seventh commandment, even when sexual contact is not involved.

<sup>35</sup> "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thes 4:3-5).

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“strangers and pilgrims” on the earth (1 Pet 2:11).<sup>36</sup> Thus we see that in marriage, too, transcendence and holiness are inseparable concepts.

**Knowledge.** The biblical understanding of knowledge as relationship is seen in the application of the word “know” in Scripture to sexual intercourse, as in Gen 4:1: “Now Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain.”<sup>37</sup> The expression is not a euphemism; it is applied in the most essential sense of the Hebrew idiom—that is, knowledge as relationship, involvement, and intimacy.

Seventh-day Adventists have championed an anthropology that insists on the wholeness of human beings. We believe that body, soul, and spirit are legitimate concepts, but we reject the Greek trichotomy<sup>38</sup> that segregates these into distinct entities that can be isolated and treated separately. We insist that they are parts of an inseparable whole.

Thus, the intimacy of the sexual relation cannot be isolated from the total intimacy of mind, body, and spirit that is marriage. The apostle Paul reflects this concept, saying that even sex with a prostitute entangles the believer in this type of bonding: “Do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For He says, “The two will become one flesh.” But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him” (1 Cor 6:15–17).

As a ritual of reenactment, sexual intercourse is a celebration and a renewal of the miracle of woman’s creation from that part of man’s body that is closest to his heart.

**Faithfulness and Steadfast Love.** The Lord’s caring involvement in the lives of His people is expressed as *hesed*, the steadfast covenant love. This becomes *agape* in the LXX and the NT. This is the love Paul says husbands are to have for their wives:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. (Eph 5:25–27)

Notice how the apostle is interweaving covenant theology with marriage theology in this passage. And he continues:

So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body. For this cause a man

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<sup>36</sup> “Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet 2:11).

<sup>37</sup> See also Matt 1:25. Although the word here in Greek is *ginosko*, the meaning is clearly rooted in the Hebrew *yada*.

<sup>38</sup> Yes, I know this word does not really exist, but it is a good one anyway.

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shall leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:28–32)

According to the Greek point of view, my wife is herself and I am myself. Thus I can stand apart from my wife and be irritated by her weaknesses. I can submit her to my judgment and pass sentence on her. But if I have understood—and am experiencing<sup>39</sup>—the Biblical concept of marriage, standing apart is impossible, because marriage, more than any other human relationship, converts the two into one flesh. Thus I cannot condemn my spouse for her weaknesses, because if we are one flesh, they are no longer her weaknesses alone. They are *my* weaknesses, too. So I cannot stand apart from her and treat her as a separate person; I cannot scorn her or cast her off, because she is part of my own body. Instead, I must feel her wounds; I must share the frustration and pain of her failures; I must experience her sense of loss and confusion. By the same token, I can rejoice in her victories, because they, too, are mine.<sup>40</sup>

In Christ, “none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself” (Rom 14:7, RSV). If this is true in our relationship with all fellow believers, how much more in Christian marriage?

One night Mr. Boaz awoke in the darkness and was startled to find a woman sleeping at his feet. “He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative’” (Ruth 3:9). Ruth is telling Boaz that she wishes to be joined to him in a levirate marriage.<sup>41</sup> But she does not say: “I want you to marry me”; she says: “Spread your covering over your maid.” The expression carries the idea of benevolent protection. Thus, it is an indication of covenant responsibility.<sup>42</sup>

We do not find in Mosaic law a specific listing of the duties involved in the marriage covenant, but there are some indications. A man who had taken a second wife was commanded not to neglect the first: “He may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights” (Exod 21:10). So at least three things were included in the husband’s duty toward his wife, and it is interesting that sexual intercourse, here called “her conjugal rights,” was one of them.

Paul also refers to intercourse as a husband’s “duty to his wife,” but adds that it is also the duty of “the wife to her husband.” He says that this is a duty because marriage gives the wife authority over her husband’s body, and the husband authority over his wife’s body. Therefore, he says, “Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to

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<sup>39</sup> Remember that according to Scripture, understanding is experiential. So I can only understand the Biblical concept by experiencing it.

<sup>40</sup> See 1 Cor 9:22; 2 Cor 11:29.

<sup>41</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ezek 16:8.

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prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control” (1 Cor 7:3–5).<sup>43</sup>

Fidelity, enjoined in the seventh commandment, is another duty of the marriage covenant. The wise man says that the unfaithful wife “leaves the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of her God” (Prov 2:17). And Malachi’s rebuke to unfaithful husbands presents a striking parallel: “The Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant” (Mal 2:14; cf. Prov 5:18–29).

From Paul’s admonition, recorded in Ephesians 5, we draw the following list of marital duties:

Love your spouse with a self-sacrificing love  
Care for her as you care for yourself  
Love her as you love your own body  
Seek your spouse’s honor  
Nurture her  
Cherish her  
Leave all others  
Cleave to your spouse alone

Loving, caring, nurturing, and honoring are overarching principles that invite expression in a multitude of ways. Paul does not say: You must wash the supper dishes for your wife; you must straighten your husband’s tie before he leaves for work in the morning; but the application of these principles may lead to behavior such as this.

**Dominance and Obedience.** We must not leave this section on covenant duties without considering Scripture’s teaching on the wife’s duty of subjection to her husband.

There is no hint in Genesis 1 or 2 of subjection or submission of Adam to Eve or of Eve to Adam. The matter of rule or headship appears for the first time in chapter 3, where the Lord is telling the man and the woman the consequences of their fall. In v. 16 the Lord says to the woman:

I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth your children.  
Yet your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you.

“I will greatly multiply your pain.” The expression is given in first person, active voice. It does not say, “Your pain will be multiplied,” but *I* will do it. It is

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<sup>43</sup> According to the Mishnah, the school of Shammai ruled that a man may abstain from sexual intercourse with his wife for two weeks, while the School of Hillel ruled that he may abstain for only one week, but both schools agreed that the husband must obtain his wife’s consent. Likewise, a wife was not to abstain from intercourse with her husband without his consent (*M Ketubah* 5:6).

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a deliberate act. So we have here a divine pronouncement. The Lord is speaking, and He is passing sentence in a context of judgment. What is spoken here comes with the weight of divine authority.

The last phrase says: “He [your husband] shall rule over you.” The word “rule” (*mashal*) establishes an order of authority.<sup>44</sup>

It is significant that the Lord is not saying this to the man, but to the woman. This indicates that her submission to him is in recognition of the Lord’s order of things. It is not a forceful domination of woman by reason of man’s superior strength.

Consistent with this is the concept of submission and rulership presented by Paul in Ephesians 5. Here, the discussion begins with an admonition to mutual submission: “Be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph 5:22).

Then he writes, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (v. 23). Here “be subject,” *hypotasso*, is in the Greek middle voice, indicating a reflexive action in which the action reverts upon the doer. It means, literally, “Subject yourselves.” Again, it is a voluntary submission, not one that is to be demanded or gained by tyrannical exercise of force. It is a submission given in recognition of heaven’s order for marriage, an acknowledgment of the necessity and benevolence of the plan under which the husband exercises his divinely designated servant leadership.

And immediately, the apostle adds a word of balance. The wife is to submit to her husband “as to the Lord,” and the husband is head of his wife “as Christ is head of the church.” Furthermore, husbands are to love their wives “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” Thus, marriage is portrayed as a free and voluntary relationship of love and respect in which the wife respects and supports the servant leadership of her husband, and the husband loves and encourages and supports his wife.

Further light on this can be gained from Paul’s discussion of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Here we can only admire the fine-tuned balance (the numbers in brackets indicate not verses, but the progression of the passage):

To Men	To Both	To Women.
[2] let each man have his own wife,	[1] Because of immoralities,	[3] and let each woman have her own husband.
[4] Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife,		[5] and likewise also the wife to her husband.
[6] The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does;		[7] and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

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<sup>44</sup> A different word, *radah*, is employed to refer to man’s dominion over the animals. An idea of the rulership implied by *mashal* may be gleaned from Gen 1:16, where the sun is created to “rule” (*mashal*) over the day and the moon over the night. See further illustrations of its meaning in 2 Sam 23:3; Prov 17:2; Isa 40:10; 63:19; Zech 6:13.

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	[8] Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control.	
	[9] But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.	
[11] and that the husband should not send his wife away.		[10] But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband
[12] But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away.		[13] And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away.
[14] For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife,	[16] for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.	[15] and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband;
	[17] Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace.	
[19] Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?		[18] For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband?

Thus the submission of the wife to her husband is not something that the wise husband demands, but that the wise wife freely gives, “in the Lord.”<sup>45</sup>

**Breaking the Covenant.** Can the marriage covenant be broken? Both Moses and Jesus say, yes, it can. Here is Moses’ answer: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some **indecency** in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts [it] in her hand and sends her out from his house” (Deut 24:1).

And Jesus said: “Whoever divorces his wife, except for **immorality**, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt 19:9).

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<sup>45</sup> “You have taken special delight in exercising your authority because you thought you could do so. But time will show that if you pursue the course your own temperament would lead you to do, you will not inspire in the heart of your wife to love, but will wean her affections from you, and she will in the end despise that authority” (Ellen G. White, *Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce*, 30).

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It would seem logical to interpret these verses together—that the “indecentcy,” (*ervah*)<sup>46</sup> mentioned by Moses as grounds for divorce and the “immorality” (*porneia*) mentioned by Jesus<sup>47</sup> must be interpreted together, that each one will be seen to throw light on the other. But we will leave further analysis of these texts to others. Here we are asking if a covenant can be broken.

The writings of the prophets also offer an answer to our question. We have noticed that through Jeremiah, the Lord said that He was divorcing both Israel and her sister Judah for their unfaithfulness (Jer 3:8ff.; Isa 50:1). In the book of Hosea the Lord also represents Himself as moving reluctantly toward divorce. We see him suffering long, forgiving much, and finally accepting the inevitable with sorrow and regret. And even when divorced, He waits, hoping for reconciliation and the restoration of the broken relationship (cf. Lev 26:3-45).

This is similar to Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 7. Living with an unbeliever may be a less-than-desirable situation. But, he says, if the unbelieving spouse consents to live with the believer, “let him not send her away” and “let her not send him away” (vv. 12, 13). If, however, the believing spouse finds it impossible to live with the unbeliever, she may leave, but “let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband” (v. 11). This apparently refers to standing by for a time to give the unbeliever a chance to reconsider the situation that caused the separation, for the apostle recognizes that there are situations under which the reconciliation is finally impossible: “If the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace” (v. 15).

**The Future of the Marriage Covenant**

We have been noticing the close parallels between the marriage covenant and the salvation covenant. But what about the future life? Is there an eschatological dimension to the marriage covenant paralleling the salvation covenant?

Scripture tells us that the future life will bring the final and complete fulfillment of the salvation covenant:

Promise	Fulfillment
<b>Exod 19:6</b> And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.	<b>Rev 1:6</b> And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father. (Also Rev 5:10)
<b>Exod 25:8</b> And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. <b>Jer 32:38</b> And they shall be my people, and I will be their God:	<b>Rev 21:3</b> And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them.

<sup>46</sup> Literally, “a matter of nakedness.” The same word in Deut. 23:14 refers to excrement.

<sup>47</sup> Among the *tannaim* (early rabbinical sages) there were some who believed that “indecentcy” must be interpreted strictly as adultery. Others felt that any masculine displeasure whatsoever was sufficient grounds for divorce. By the time of Jesus, the second viewpoint was generally accepted (Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Marriage,” *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*).

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The passages from the book of Revelation in the right-hand column make it clear that the life of the redeemed in heaven, rather than being the end of the salvation covenant, is its fulfillment; that in heaven the objectives of the covenant are finally and fully met.

The prophecy of Jeremiah 31 regarding the future of the New Covenant offers a further insight into this fulfillment. Here the prophet says: “‘And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,’ declares the Lord” (Jer 31:34).

Our study of the word “know” (*yada*) revealed that one must be involved with what one knows. Knowledge includes relationship, concern, and involvement. Now, in this prophecy, we learn that God’s people will all “know” Him, to the point that no one will ever again need to urge others to “Know the Lord.”

This tells us that the fulfillment of the covenant means an end to the isolation and separation between God and His people. The salvation covenant is a covenant of connectedness—of *divine-human interconnectedness*. Jeremiah’s prophecy assures us that in the future life this dimension will find its fulfillment.

But what about the marriage covenant in the future life? It might appear that this is where the parallelism between the marriage covenant and the salvation covenant ends, for we recall Jesus’ words: “In the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven” (Matt 22:30).

Jesus did not elaborate on what he meant by saying “as the angels of God in heaven,” but if He is contrasting the married state with the state of the angels, this would indicate that marriage, at least as we know it in this life, will no longer exist.<sup>48</sup>

But what is the purpose of the marriage covenant? “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper suitable for him’” (Gen 2:18). Marriage was created by God as an antidote for alone-ness. So the marriage covenant, too, is a covenant of connectedness. And marriage is the highest form of human-to-human inter-connectedness.

Jesus’ remark about no marriage after the resurrection was made when the Saducees asked him who would be the husband in heaven of a woman who had had seven husbands in this life. It is a logical question. In the present state of affairs, it is impossible to imagine happiness under such circumstances. Feelings

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<sup>48</sup> Many students of the Word believe Jesus is saying here that in the future life there will be no sexuality, but this is mere speculation based on personal feelings toward the subject. Actually, we don’t know enough about the nature of angels to be able to understand this enigmatic saying. Jesus may be saying that the marriage customs of his day (and ours) would be obsolete in a place where everyone is as faithful to covenants as are the angels. Or he may even be saying that after resurrection, when we are completely transformed, we will be able, like the angels, to fully and intimately know others without need of the protection of marriage. We simply don’t know.

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of rivalry and jealousy would be inevitable. But in heaven—says Jesus—we will be “as the angels.” Whatever else may be included in the meaning of this expression, it certainly must mean that our selfish natures will be radically transformed, because this is the only way we could conceive that seven successive husbands could associate together lovingly.

So if Jesus’ prophecy means that in the future life there will be an end to marriage as we know it, it certainly does not mean that in heaven there will be a return to isolation and aloneness. Rather, we will see the fulfillment of the great objective of the marriage covenant—we will see the *perfection of human-to-human interconnectedness*.

And just as the salvation covenant will have achieved its purpose, and no one will ever again say, “Know the Lord,” the marriage covenant will also have achieved its purpose, and no one will ever again be alone or isolated.

What better way to conclude than with this well-known picture of the social life of heaven:

There the redeemed shall “know, even as also they are known.” The loves and sympathies which God Himself has planted in the soul shall there find truest and sweetest exercise. The pure communion with holy beings, the harmonious social life with the blessed angels and with the faithful ones of all ages who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, the sacred ties that bind together “the whole family in heaven and earth”—these help to constitute the happiness of the redeemed.<sup>49</sup>

### APPENDIX

#### A Theology of Singleness?

Could there be such a thing as a “theology of singleness”? After all, doesn’t the Bible say that it is “not good” to be single? Does it have something to say to the 50% or more of the “families” in some of our churches that are in this category? Or does the Christian faith actually lay an additional burden on these people by placing them in the “not good” category?

At first glance, it would appear that the Christian single is, indeed, under a stigma, because of Genesis 2:18: “It is not good for man to be alone.” But a closer look at this text and others offers a different picture.

When the Lord spoke these words, Adam was not just single; he was alone. So we would have to ask if the unhappy situation God was addressing is singleness, or is it aloneness? Aloneness goes beyond loneliness. It translates into isolation, and at times into self-centeredness, looking out for number one and maybe even a back-to-the-wall defensiveness.

Marriage may be the opposite of singleness, but it is not the opposite of aloneness. The opposite of aloneness is connectedness. It is possible to flee from the curse of aloneness through marriage, but that is not the only possibility, for

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<sup>49</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, 676.

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connectedness is not the exclusive privilege of the married. In fact, marriage does not guarantee the end of aloneness any more than singleness makes it inevitable. The apostle Paul was single, but he was not alone. He was one of the most connected individuals on the planet. Maybe that is why he did not consider his status to be a curse or an unbearable burden (1 Cor 7:7).

Scripture reveals that the believing Jew had a strong sense of personal connectedness. Every time an Israelite repeated the words of the covenant between God and Abraham, he felt personally included. He derived his sense of worth and his personal identity from his status as a member of a family—the family of Abraham.

And the New Testament reveals that the Gentiles come into the kingdom of God under exactly the same plan. They are branches grafted into the trunk of Israel (Rom 11:11–18). To the Ephesians Paul says: Remember that you were formerly “separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise,” but now in Christ “you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and *members of the family of God*” (Eph 2:12, 19). This means that all who are in Christ are members of God’s “family in heaven and earth” (Eph 3:15).

So, far from placing an additional burden on singles, Christianity teaches that single persons can be as connected as the married, that neither need be more alone, and neither is more protected.

And thus the promise of Isaiah 56:4, 5 is fulfilled:

“For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.” (Cf. Matt 19:29)

**Loron Wade** is a member of the Theological Faculty of Montemorelos University in Mexico, where he teaches Science and Religion, Daniel, Revelation, Bible Teachings, Research Methods, and Greek. lwade@umontemorelos.edu.mx