

## "MARRIAGE" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Alastair G. Hunter

### A survey of the evidence, with some preliminary interpretation

#### **A Introduction**

Any discussion of "marriage" in the Old Testament has to take account at the outset of two rather awkward facts. First, there is scant evidence of any ritual or ceremony accompanying the process by which a man (and it is virtually always a male initiative) picks a "wife". And second, there is a limited use of technical language which identifies any of the following: *Wife*, *Husband*, *Wedding*, or *To Marry*. In the course of this paper, I will clarify these negative points further; but in any case, I do not wish to convey the impression that men and women did not live together in family contexts within which children were born and raised and sexual and other connubial rights observed. As we shall see, there are some passages which deal in a limited way with family life and the nature of cohabitation, but there is no systematic treatment of this, and little evidence of such things as vows, wedding practices, or even commonly observed customs.

To these initial observations I must add others, equally weighty for any in-depth discussion of the subject. First, the predominant legal context is property. Women are possessions or chattels, with few exceptions always dependent on men (hence the vulnerable position of widows, and the existence of the levirate law which imposes on the brother of a deceased man a certain duty of cohabitation with his widow). For this reason, adultery is a one-sided affair: a married man cannot commit adultery with a single woman; conversely, however, a married woman who takes another lover is automatically guilty of adultery. The second point to be made here is related to the first: it is that polygamy in various forms is normal. Men may have several wives, or concubines, or relations with their servants, and there seems to be no moral consequence. Indeed, though technically a man who takes another man's wife is guilty of adultery, there is strong anecdotal evidence that even this was tacitly permitted (David is of course the classic example, for not only taking other men's wives – the plural is accurate – but also abandoning his own first wife, in direct contravention of the law in Exodus 21).

At this stage one might be tempted to take a Marcionite approach and simply determine that the Old Testament has nothing to say to us on the subject. But that would be a grave mistake, for the metaphoric force of the love between men and women is a powerful element of prophetic rhetoric (and not just negatively, as in Hosea). The very term for God's core nature – *rachim* – is derived from the noun *rechem*, which means "womb", as Phyllis Trible observed in a famous study, and there are instances of God being portrayed as displaying the kind of emotions associated with wives and mothers. I will deal with this in §E. Further, unlike the case of New Testament Greek, there is but one word for "love" – *ahav* – and it is used of everything from the raw emotion that drives people into each other's arms to the most exalted divine relationship with humankind. This suggests that there is something to be said for seeing the

OT's testimony as much more gutsy, much more heartfelt, and much less legalistic than that of the NT and subsequent church tradition.

Of course, the culture of the Hebrew Bible is constrained by patriarchal attitudes and sexist assumptions; but we can resile from these without, I think, losing the proverbial baby. At least, I shall try to do so in this paper; though it is worth entering the caveat that many traditional attitudes to women and marriage, which persisted until late in the twentieth century, were scarcely less sexist than those of the Bible, and there remain many cultures and religious traditions which are fully in keeping with the assumptions of the Hebrew Bible.

## **B Technical Terms**

### 1 RELATING TO MARRIAGE

#### 1.1 Husband

- (a) The most common Hebrew word is *'ish*, which is simply the customary term for the male of the species, followed by *'enosh*, a general term for humankind. This, together with 1.2 (a), indicates a man and a woman in cohabitation without the legal or customary associations which accompany the terms "husband" and "wife" in English.
- (b) In a number of passages the term *ba'al* (which means 'lord' or 'master') is used – its use, conveying as it does the sense of possession, ownership or control, is a reminder of the unbalanced power relationship which characterises "marriage" in the Old Testament.
- (c) The same root serves as a verb-form, 'to marry' or 'be married', in Dt 21.13, 24.1; Isa 54.5, 62.4,5; Jer 31.32; Mal 2.11; Prov 30.23; 1 Chron 4.22.
- (d) In one instance the word *rea'*, which means neighbour, companion, friend, seems to refer to a relationship between the sexes: in Jer 3.20 both KJV and NRSV render the word as 'husband'. There is a possible parallel concept in Prov 2.17, though in that case a different word is used.

#### 1.2 Wife

- (a) In almost all places where the English has 'wife' the Hebrew is the simple term for the female of the species, *'ishshah*.
- (b) One rare phrase, based on the Hebrew for 'master', turns up just four times: in Gen 20.3; Dt 22.22; and Isa 54.1 and 62.4. It is *be'ulah* or *be'ulat ba'al*, a passive form meaning something like 'she who is owned'.
- (c) Concubines (*pilegash*) are also known. While they are obviously not wives in any sense that would be acceptable today, they clearly form part of the normal structures of family life (at least in upper-class circles) in ancient Israel.

#### 1.3 Bride & betrothal

- (a) The term *kallah* is translated about equally often as 'bride' or 'daughter-in-law'.

- (b) A related word, *kelulot*, is found once meaning 'betrothal' in Jer 2.2.
- (c) The other Hebrew word commonly translated as 'betrothal' (*'aras*) is defined in most modern dictionaries as 'desire', and in truth 'betrothal' here is little more than the expression by a man of his wish to have a particular woman. It certainly bears no relationship to modern Western ideas of engagement, which encompass a mutual agreement.
- (d) There is a term for 'mother-in-law' (*chamot*) which is almost completely restricted to the book of Ruth; its only other occurrence being in Micah 7.6. It has a male equivalent – see 1.4(c).

#### 1.4 Men and marriage

The root *ch-th-n* is used in a number of places to refer to a groom or engaged man; but its core sense is that of the father-in-law / son-in-law relationship. Interestingly, it is also used in passages where intermarriage is condemned. These various usages are set out below:

- (a) Groom (*chathan*). This usage can be found in Isa 61.10, 62.5, Jer 7.34, 16.9, 25.10, 33.11; Joel 2.16 and Ps 19.5. The first two (positively) and the next four (negatively) refer to the rejoicing over a bride (see 1.3(a)) and groom; the Joel and Psalms citations refer to a canopy, which seems reminiscent of the later Jewish wedding practice where the couple take their vows beneath a *chuppah* – this is the term used in these two passages, though not with the meaning of the later ceremony. In addition, there is the strange passage in Ex 4.25,26 which describes a circumcision ritual concluding with the words 'a bridegroom of blood to me / by circumcision'.
- (b) Son-in-law (*chathan*). Strictly a relationship term, conveying no information of use to our current study.
- (c) Father-in-law (*chothen*). Grammatically an active participle, perhaps indicating the one responsible for bringing about the marriage. Again, no other significance is indicated, though the role of the woman's father in agreeing a marriage was no doubt key given the evidence for dowries which had to be paid to him. Another term for this relationship – *cham* – is found in Genesis 38.13,25 and 1 Sam 4.19,21. The former refers to Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar, the latter to Eli and his son Phineas's wife.
- (d) To marry. In its verbal usage the root occurs in Gen 34.9; Dt 7.3; Josh 23.12; 1 Sam 18.21,22,23,26,27; 1 Ki 3.1; Ezra 9.14; and 2 Chron 18.1. The verb form used is the *hithpael* which is a reflexive form which could arguably mean that the action implied has a reference both to its subject and its object: in this case, something like 'to arrange a mutually beneficial alliance in marriage'. But there is a further point to note, namely that many of these instances refer to *intermarriage*: Shechem and Dinah in Genesis 34; a warning against intermarriage in principle in Dt 7, Josh 23 and Ezra 9; Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter in 1 Ki 3; Jehoshaphat and Ahab in 2 Chron 18. Only in 1 Sam 18 (David and Michal) does the marriage take place between individuals of the same group,

and even here the clear dynastic implications bring it within the general scope of the verb as I have described it.

- (e) Nuptials (*chathunnah*). This is a *hapax legomenon* – a one-off usage in Songs 3.11, where it is explicitly connected to the marriage of Solomon (though to which of his many wives and concubines we do not know!).

## 1.5 Levirate Law

- (a) As a verb: to cohabit with a deceased brother's wife (*yabam*). Gen 38.8; Dt 25.5,7.
- (b) Referring to the brother-in-law – strictly speaking, husband's brother – (*yabam*) in Dt 25.5,7, and the sister-in-law – again, to be precise, brother's wife – (*yebamah*) in Dt 25.7,9 and Ruth 1.15.

## 2 THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECT

### 2.1 Love

- (a) The fundamental term is *ahav*, and it is used indiscriminately just as the English word 'love' is applied to everything from the most basic of desires to the most exalted of emotions. There are far too many instances to give a detailed survey; Appendix 1 contains a list of the different usages to show just how wide is the range.
- (b) The sexual act is most commonly referred to using one of two verbs: 'to know' (*yada<sup>c</sup>*) – hence the popular joke about 'knowing in the biblical sense' – and 'to go into' (*ba<sup>c</sup>*). The fact that the former is a key term in the wisdom tradition in the Old Testament, and is at the heart of the myth of the Garden of Eden ('the tree of "the knowledge," good and bad', Gen 2.9) may reinforce the continuum of emotional experience implied by the foregoing account of *ahav*. The third common term which is used is 'to lie with' (*shakav*) – again reminiscent of the English euphemism 'to sleep with'.

### 2.2 Compassion and mercy

- (a) Merciful (*rachum*) There is a very well-known saying about God's compassion or mercy which finds its fullest expression in Exodus 34.6-7. It is notable that this term is only ever used with reference to an emotion ascribed to God; even more surprising is the fact that with only two possible exceptions (Ps 78.38 and 112.4) every instance of this word is in a context which clearly links it to the primary saying in Exodus (see Dt 4.31; Joel 2.13; Jonah 4.2; Neh 9.17,31; Ps 86.15, 103.8, 111.4, 145.8; 2 Chron 30.9.) So, this is clearly an exclusively divine aspect, and one whose importance can hardly be exaggerated, as Trible (see footnote 2) has made clear.
- (b) To be compassionate (*racham*); compassion (*rachamim*). These two related terms (i.e., they come from the same root as *rachum*) are similarly highly specific to Yahweh. The verb 'to show/have compassion' and the noun compassion are

with very few exceptions the property of God (either showing or withholding compassion), and where they are not it is usually because God has permitted some other power either to show or to deny compassion.

- (c) Womb (*rechem*). This concrete term, which is translated mostly as 'womb', is used literally in almost all of its occurrences (31 in total), with just one metaphoric instance in 1 Kings 3.26, the story of the two prostitutes who appeal to Solomon to adjudicate as to whose is the living child. The phrase is a curious one, literally something like 'her "wombs" became excited because of her son'. The verb in question – *kamar* – only turns up in three other places: one is Gen 43.30, where Joseph's 'compassion' became excited towards his brothers. There are grounds for seeing the Hebrew terms translated here as 'wombs' and 'compassion' as being essentially the same – a link which offers a way to understand how an essentially female characteristic was transformed into an aspect of God. Just as a woman experiences maternal passion, so too (by transference) can God feel passionately about his people. The second is Hosea 11.8, where God gives expression to the sheer force of emotion that prevents him from abandoning Ephraim: 'my tenderness is stirred up'. The third (in Lam 5.10) is in a quite different metaphorical context not relevant to our discussion.

## **C An examination of key passages**

### 1 EDEN

The obvious starting point here is the material in Genesis 1 and 2, which has substantial things to say about the nature of men and women as two aspects of one reality. The first creation story (C1) portrays us as a combined unity-in-diversity which forms an image of God (26a, 27). 'Humankind' is '*adam*', while 'male' and 'female' are two technical terms *zakar* and *neqebah* which are also used of animals in general, particularly in some of the regulations for selecting animals for offerings, and also in matters of uncleanness and, interestingly, in one of the principles of selection of animals for Noah's ark. Specific parallels to the use in C1 are to be found positively in Gen 5.2, which reiterates the theme of C1, and negatively in Dt 4.16, which bans the making of any 'male or female' likeness of God.

God then proceeds to bless this composite and instructs them to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth. This injunction seems to be exclusively related to procreation. What C1 means by all of this is far from clear, and has been the subject of many theological volumes; it seems safe to say, however, that it has no light to shed on the institution of marriage.

Turning to the second creation account (C2) in Genesis 2, we find an account which, though couched in quite different language, affords significant parallels with C1. To be precise, Yahweh first constructs woman as man's 'helper' out of his side (2.21-22). Then in 2.23 'the man' is given words which affirm the essential oneness of the two ('bone of my bones ... flesh of my flesh'), after which the famous etiological proclamation is inserted: 'Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman, and they become one flesh.'

It could be argued that this comment has some bearing at least by implication on the state of marriage. We might deduce that marriage is to be seen as a kind of organic bonding between a male and a female, as if by doing this the original oneness of the image of God can be restored. However, it is again significant that no specific reference to marriage as an institution is indicated, nor can it be concluded that this bond is unique or indissoluble. What seems clear from this admittedly brief review is that both C1 and C2 in different ways affirm the oneness of men and women and the primacy of the bond for procreation. Beyond that it is, in my view, impossible to proceed further into any specific claims about the nature of marriage, though it is of significance to note that other texts which refer to a legal relationship seem to have no interest in the implied equality of the two constituent parties which is such a prominent feature of C1 and 2. This should serve as a warning against simply adding together everything that seems pertinent in order to arrive at a composite picture: any such composite may be little more than a fiction with no bearing on the actual practice of marriage in the OT.

## 2 THE LEGAL CORPUS IN THE PENTATEUCH

There are legal passages in Exodus 21.7-11 and 22.16-17, Deuteronomy 21.10-17, 22.13-29 and 24.1-5, and Numbers 5.11-31 which pertain to various marital situations. To these we should add the seventh and tenth commandments, forbidding respectively adultery and the 'coveting' of another man's wife (along with a range of other desirable goods such as property, animals and servants) in Exodus 20.14,17 and Deuteronomy 5.18,21. However, even a cursory examination makes it clear that they entail a whole series of assumptions which, regardless of questions of biblical authority, are offensive to modern Western society.

Firstly, all of these laws are firmly in the context of a male point of view. There is, for example, no ban on a woman (or a man for that matter!) desiring her or his neighbour's husband – which is not to deny that both of these might be ruled out on other grounds. The fact that polygamy is normal (see Ex 21.10 and Dt 21.15-17) is distinctly problematic – God is never said to disapprove of the practice – yet a woman who took a second husband would be automatically guilty of adultery. This is not just theoretical, for many narratives deal with the subject in an entirely matter-of-fact way. Thus, for example, Abraham's fathering of Ishmael with Hagar, and reference in Gen 25.6 to the sons of his concubines. Or Jacob, who has in effect four wives: Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah, who are mothers severally of the twelve eponymous tribes. Samuel's father has two wives, and the family life of both David and Solomon would shock even the readers of Hello! and OK.

Secondly, women are scarcely portrayed as free agents. That is not to say that they do not have rights: indeed, in one significant legal ruling concerning the daughters of Zelophehad Moses makes it clear that in certain circumstances they can inherit property. But these rights are within the gift of significant men: fathers, husbands, brothers and brothers-in-law, and sons, and the same daughters are subsequently restricted as to whom they may marry. The concept of an independent unmarried woman was so abnormal as to be the subject of special prophetic attention: hence the repeated injunction to be just to widows who, like orphans, are unnaturally deprived of their protecting environment. Isaiah 3.18 – 4.1 paints a dramatic picture of the societal disintegration which takes place when such norms are violated. In the passages under consideration they can be spoils of war, sold by their fathers (Ex 21.7), raped by predatory men (Dt 22.28-29), sent packing when their face no longer fits (Ex 21.7-11, Dt

24.1-4), subjected to humiliating virginity tests (Dt 22.13-21), and expected to endure a judicial test process should their husband even suspect infidelity (Num 5.11-31) – and all of this under the rubric of what passes for marriage. Clearly, we need to take careful stock of this disturbing reality.

Thirdly, it is necessary to make some comments on the so-called Levirate Law. This is found in one legal passage, Deut 25.5-10, which concludes with the enigmatic term of opprobrium ‘the house of him whose sandal was pulled off’, which seems to have some relationship to the curious sandal episode in Ruth 4.7-8. In essence, the purpose of this law is to ensure the continuity of property within a family (there are similarities to the second part of the judgment concerning the daughters of Zelophehad in Num 36.1-12): the continuity of ‘the name’ has been shown to be a token for the preservation of property rights. Two narratives, both involving sexual impropriety or a strong hint of it, seem to relate to this law: Genesis 38 and the Book of Ruth. In the latter there is a strong hint of seduction: the language of Ruth 3.7 (‘she came and uncovered [Boaz’s] feet and lay down’) involves a well-known Hebrew euphemism. In the former, Judah (clearly no innocent) is tricked by his daughter-in-law posing as a prostitute: the resulting children are acknowledged by him, and the elder, Perez, then figures in the genealogy in Ruth 4.18-22 as the ancestor of Ruth’s son Obed, in turn the grandfather of David. The accuracy or otherwise of these family lists is unimportant. What is possibly significant for our investigation is that the Old Testament has no problems with at the least irregular relationships within its central theological discourse.

### 3 THE SONG OF SONGS

Not surprisingly this astonishing erotic poem contains a striking range of language to do with the expression of love between a man and a woman. The following table lists some of the relevant terms:

concubine	<i>pilesheg</i>	6.8,9
bride	<i>kallah</i>	4.8,9,10,11,12; 5.1
betrothal	<i>chathunah</i>	3.11
to love	<i>'ahav</i>	1.3,4,7; 3.1,2,3,4
beloved	<i>dod</i>	1.13,14,16; 2.3,8,9,10,16,17; 4.16; 5.2,4,5,6,8,9,10, 16; 6.1,2,3; 7.10,11,12,14; 8.5,14
love	<i>dod</i>	1.2,4; 4.10; 5.1; 7.13
breast	<i>dad</i>	1.13; 4.5; 7.4,8,9; 8.1,8,10
sister (= lover/wife)	<i>'achoth</i>	4.9,10,12; 5.1,2

Both the synagogue and the church have struggled with the interpretation of the Songs, and have relied on allegorical readings to make sense of it. I have no wish to comment on this here, rather simply to observe that in its original form it characterises something which is found elsewhere in the Old Testament: a frankness about, and celebration of the sheer sexual pleasure to be found in human relationships. There is something refreshing about this, given the prurience with which we often deal with this subject. We either fetishise it or demonise it, consigning it to the realm of unspoken and faintly unpleasant necessities, or using it in the most obscene manner as a means of public seduction and female humiliation in advertising and the

media generally. How different, I submit, from the openness and honesty of the Song of Songs, and indeed the almost naive charm of Proverbs 5.18-19: 'Rejoice in the woman of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love.'

The contrast between this affecting poem and the harsh restrictions implied in the legal texts could not be more striking, and serve as another reminder of the impossibility of creating a single authoritative statement on the institution of marriage in ancient Israel.

#### 4 PROVERBS 31

The most complete portrait we have of a marriage is in Proverbs 31.10-35. At a superficial level it presents us with an astonishingly capable woman who evidently holds her (middle-class?) family together and enables her husband to maintain his place and dignity in the public arena. But there are signs that there is more to the description than this literal account can reveal. For a start, the opening description uses a term which in its masculine form means 'strong' or 'powerful' – this then is a powerful woman. Secondly, the chapter stands as the completion of the first nine chapters of Proverbs, with which it forms a bracket for the book's older material. And the main theme of these nine chapters is the importance of the semi-divine figure of wisdom. There are many suggestive verbal links between 31 and 1-9 which confirm the integrity of the whole piece, which in turn makes it plausible that we should treat the powerful woman of chapter 31 as a model for wisdom, and indeed for that understanding of wisdom which sees her as the source of the essential knowledge of God without which society would crumble.

This very brief reading should serve to show that, whether or not such ideal wives exist, and regardless of the male-priority conventions within which the allegory operates, within the Old Testament there is a recognition of the vitality, influence, and God-given strength of the woman's leadership within marriage.

I will conclude this section by recalling once again the stark contrast between the kind of unity implied in Eden, the erotic force of the Song of Songs and the powerful women in Proverbs on the one hand, and the punitive legislation surrounding marriage in the Pentateuch.

### **D Custom and practice**

#### 1 TO MARRY

There are three Hebrew terms most commonly understood in translation to mean 'marry'. The most frequent is *laqach*, whose basic sense is 'to take'. Only twice out of dozens of examples is a woman the subject: in Genesis 30.15 where Leah accuses Rachel of having 'taken away my husband [lit. "man"]', and Ezekiel 16.32 which disapproves of an 'adulterous wife [lit. "woman"]', who receives strangers instead of her husband [lit. "man"]'. Secondly, with about forty instances, but of similar purport is the verb *nasa'* whose basic meaning is 'to lift/raise up'.

All of its active subjects where 'marriage' is concerned are male. Thirdly we have the verb '*aras*' (occurring ten times), with its primary meaning of male choice or desire.

The conclusion seems unavoidable that in normal circumstances marriage partners were chosen by men (or their representatives) in negotiation with the father of the potential bride. See also the stories in Genesis 24, 29, and 34.

## 2 THE DOWRY

There are a scattering of references to the dowry or bride-price (see the details in note 10 above) which suggest that the father of the potential bride would expect a payment of some kind. There is not enough evidence to derive any kind of scale of charges (50 shekels is the only sum mentioned), and in a pre-monetary society the dowry would almost certainly have been in kind. Rebekah, her brother and her mother are given costly gifts, for instance, by Abraham's servant in Gen 24.53; and I suppose Jacob's total of fourteen years' service for first Leah then Rachel could be regarded as a kind of dowry (Gen 29). The practice is certainly widespread in human society, so that its occurrence in Israel would not be surprising.

## 3 WEDDING CUSTOMS

Of these we have virtually no evidence. Wedding ceremonies are not attested, though if Psalm 45, as is usually assumed, is a wedding song, that might support the idea of an elaborate royal wedding event. Song of Songs 3.6-11 seems to lend some support to this idea. Mostly, however, we find that once the decision is made the man 'takes' the woman and she 'becomes his woman' (Gen 24.67). There is mention of a feast when Laban takes Leah and brings her to Jacob – who interestingly does not realise his mistake until the morning! There are political shenanigans associated with Saul's giving David his daughter Michal as a wife (1 Sam 18.17-29), but no ceremony. Later, in 1 Sam 25, David marries Abigail and Ahinoam, again without fuss, while Saul passes Michal on to another husband. If the death of Abigail's husband Nabal is murky; there is no ambiguity about the fate of Uriah, who stood between David and his next woman, Bathsheba. Again, no ceremony, simply an act of appropriation (2 Sam 11.1-12.25).

Joel 2.15-16, in an eschatological vision, makes passing reference to the bridegroom leaving his room and the bride her canopy. Again, it is easy to associate these with common traditions of marriage, where the couple are kept separate until the moment of the wedding (true in Islam as well). The reference to a canopy suggests later Jewish practice; but it is quite different, for in later custom both the bride and the groom stand beneath the same canopy for their nuptials. Ps 19.5, in speaking of the sun 'which comes out like a bridegroom from his canopy', reinforces the likelihood of this feature within marriage, but unlike Joel associates it with the bridegroom rather than the bride.

Isaiah 49.18 and 61.20, and Jer 2.32 refer to ornaments that a bride and bridegroom would wear, while Isaiah 62.5 and Jer 7.34 (= 16.9, 25.10, 33.11) hint at an occasion when the bridegroom 'rejoices over the bride'.

Perhaps the most striking feature in all of these observations about marriage customs is the complete absence of any form of words – vows, commitments, promises etc are lacking, and the evidence is that (from a male point of view at least) divorce was easy, polygamy was normal, and the grounds for either could be as flimsy as ‘she doesn’t please me any more’.

## **E Emotion as raw force and metaphor**

### **1 HUMAN LOVE**

If the law, such as it is, and the relevant narratives stand in contrast (see §C above), there is one area in which the Old Testament presents a really powerful witness: that of the emotions. We have seen that Song of Songs and Proverbs 5.18-19 celebrate the physical nature of love; and there is no shortage of evidence of passionate relationships (either for good or for ill) in its pages. I cite, positively, Jacob and Rachel, and negatively, David and Bathsheba.

Parental love is clearly in evidence, from the traumatic testing of that love in Genesis 22, or the desperate attempt by Moses’ mother to save her son (Ex 2.1-10), to the prostitute’s willingness to give up her child if it would save his life (1 Kings 3.16-28). Hannah is willing to humiliate herself to have a child, and is prepared to dedicate that child to God (1 Sam 1-2), and in a somewhat more dubious form we have examples of favouritism in the behaviour of Rebekah and Isaac towards Jacob and Esau, and of Jacob to first Joseph then Benjamin. The dark side is revealed in the myth of Jephthah’s sacrifice of his (perhaps revealingly anonymous) daughter – similar to the classical myth of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia (Judges 11). While there is no justification for this dreadful act, it is ironic that (like Genesis 22) the sacrifice is of one dearly loved.

Other relationships are represented. Brotherly love is somewhat problematic, given the prevalence of the folk-motif of brotherly rivalry and the success of the youngest; nevertheless Joseph clearly loves his brothers (Gen 43.30) and Jacob and Esau are reconciled (Gen 33.4). Ruth’s love for her mother-in-law Naomi is proverbial, while the daughters of Noah indulge a dark passion for their father (Gen 19.30-38).

### **2 DIVINE LOVE**

I will begin with the discussion in §B, 2.2(c). My reason for expanding on the seemingly recondite point of the grammatical links between 1 Kings 3.26, Gen 43.30 and Hosea 11.8 is this: it seems to me that one of the primary lessons to be learned from an Old Testament perspective on human relationships is that they are (a) common to God and humankind; (b) passionate (see the single expression for human lust and divine love); and (c) cross-gendered: the metaphors allow both men and women and God to feel in exactly the same way. David and Jonathan’s love for each other famously transcends that of women (2 Sam 1.26), God’s passion for Israel is like that of a woman for her daughter, or a brother for his estranged siblings.

This approach is developed in several significant passages. In Isaiah 49.14-18 a woman’s enduring compassion for her child is used as a model for God’s even greater compassion. In Psalm 18.1 David’s emotion towards God is one which is in all other instances that normally

attributed to God's feelings for humanity. The links between 1Kings 3.26, Genesis 43.30, and Hosea 11.8 summarise nicely these three dimensions. In Isaiah 54.1-8 we find God as a loving and compassionate husband, in Jeremiah it is Israel who is portrayed as Yahweh's bride, while Psalm 103.13 has him as a fond father. And of course there is the magnificent Hosea 11.1-4, 8, where the portrait of God is undoubtedly that of a loving mother unable to let go even of her most recalcitrant children.

The important point to emphasise in this discussion is that, with the exception of the word-group derived from *racham*, there is no emotional terminology which is reserved either for God on the one hand or for humankind on the other – and we have seen that even the reserved group crosses the boundary in 1 Kings 3.26 and Gen 43.30. Lust and love, passion and commitment, the sheer pleasure of relationships, are common to the human and the divine. And it is this that I take as the single most important message from the Old Testament on the subject of relationships: we mirror on earth what God (perhaps anthropomorphically) knows in heaven. The love of a woman for a man, a parent for a child, a sibling for his or her sib – these all partake of transcendence, and do so entirely without benefit of vows and oaths, legal rules and conventions.

Perhaps (from a human perspective) we can go further: these experiences we have at the human level do not just mirror transcendence. In a way, they contribute to its definition.

## **F Concluding unscientific note**

Implicit in this paper is a rejection of the Old Testament's legal provisions for 'marriage'. As a matter of fact, we have as a society long since departed from them; but it might be necessary in honesty to admit that we have allowed another standard to qualify our reading of the Hebrew bible. That could be a problem for some interpretations of what authority means; it is not a problem for this particular writer, but it needs to be said.

Alastair G Hunter

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## **APPENDIX 1**

An indicative list of the uses of the verb 'to love' and the abstract noun 'love' in the Old Testament. These are samples only, but they cover pretty much the full range of human emotion, desire and want, whether concrete or abstract, personal or divinely orientated, together with examples of the same terms used with God as the subject.

### **1 The verb 'to love' ('ahav)**

#### **(a) Human**

Father for son	Gen 22.2	Sexual love for wife	Gen 24.67
Mother for son	Gen 25.28	Slave for master	Ex 21.5
Neighbour/stranger	Lev 19.18,34	Of God	Dt 6.5
Saul for David	1 Sam 16.21	Jonathan for David	1 Sam 18.1
People for David	1 Sam 18.16	Wife for Husband	1 Sam 18.20

Incest	2 Sam 13.1	Of many women	1 Ki 11.1
Woman for lover	Hos 3.1	Of wisdom	Pr 4.6
Of friend	Pr 17.17	D-in-law for m-in-law	Ruth 4.15
Erotic love	Songs 1.3		

(b) God's Love

Of ancestors	Dt 4.37	His people	Dt 7.13
Of Solomon	2 Sam 12.24	Israel	Is 43.4
Of justice	Isa 61.8	Of the sanctuary	Mal 2.11
Of Mount Zion	Ps 78.68	For the righteous	Ps 146.8
Wisdom's love	Pr 8.17		

(c) Impersonal

For food	Gen 27.4	For bribes	Isa 1.23
Of sleep	Isa 56.10	Lust and prostitution	Isa 57.8
Prostitute's pay	Hos 9.1	Of good	Amos 5.15
Of evil	Mic 3.2	Of truth & peace	Zech 8.19
Of the sanctuary	Ps 26.8	Of long life	Ps 34.12
Of righteousness	Ps 45.7	Of cursing	Ps 109.17
Of commandments	Ps 119.47	Of law	Ps 119.97
Of God's promise	Ps 119.140	Of stupidity	Pr 1.22
Of death	Pr 8.36	Of sin and strife	Pr 17.19
Of discipline	Pr 12.1	Of pleasure	Pr 21.17
Of money	Qoh 5.10	A time to love	Qoh 3.8

(d) Abandoning faith

Alien ways	Jer 2.25	Deceit	Jer 5.31
False gods	Jer 8.2	Oppression	Hos 12.7
False piety	Amos 4.5		

**2 The abstract noun 'love' ('ahavah)**

(a) Human

Jacob / Rachel	Gen 29.20	God	Dt 10.12
Jonathan / David	1 Sam 18.3	David / Jonathan	2 Sam 1.26
Amnon / Tamar	2 Sam 13.15	Misplaced love	2 Sam 19.6
Mother / child	Hos 11.4	Solomon / foreign women	1 Ki 11.2
Wife / husband	Pr 5.19	Love in society	Pr 10.12, 15.17
Erotic	Songs 2.4		

(b) God's love

Israel	Dt 7.8		
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(c) Impersonal

Bribes	Jer 2.2	Lust	Jer 2.33
Kindness	Mic 6.8		