

MARRIAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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A survey of the evidence, with some preliminary interpretation

[Note: This paper introduces a significant number of Hebrew words and expressions. They are all defined as they appear; however, to assist the reader without Hebrew I have provided a glossary, in Appendix 2. From time to time I will refer to the grammatical idea of the 'root': the convention that groups of two or three letters define semantic 'packets' from which various words – verbs, nouns, adjectives – are derived. The convention amongst Hebraists is to write these without vowels; for the sake of clarity, I have chosen to write them using the simplest vocalised verb form. Thus the root 'hv 'love' is written as 'ahav.]

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 very little 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*¹. 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.

On a related matter, there are some passages and associated terminology which deal with the ending of a relationship between a man and a woman. But the English term 'divorce', like 'marriage', has no real equivalent in Hebrew, and divorce, like marriage, is normally a male prerogative: it is the man who 'puts away' the woman. The bulk of the evidence indicates that there was no problem with divorce – it seems to have been a simple and accepted process. The one exception is in Malachi 2.10-16, a passage which I will discuss in more detail in

¹ Not wishing to impose on the reader a tedious review of basic terms, I have placed a more detailed discussion of linguistic points in the appendices to supplement those dealt with in the body of the paper. At the outset, however, it is worth noting that there is no real Hebrew equivalent for the English terms 'husband' and 'wife'; in almost every place where English versions use these terms the underlying Hebrew is the common word for man ('ish), woman ('ishshah), or master (ba'al).

§C. Finally, while there is reference to a 'bill of divorce', this is not defined further in the sources.

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 levirate² 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 widely attested. 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 1-3). The very term for God's core nature – *rachamim* – is derived from the noun *rechem* which means 'womb', as Phyllis Tribble observed in a famous study³, 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 §D. Further, in contrast with 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 in western society 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 – in my view regrettably – fully in keeping with the assumptions of the Hebrew Bible.

² The term 'levirate' is derived from the Latin *levir* meaning 'brother-in-law', and has nothing to do with Levites.

³ *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (SCM, 1992), pp. 31 – 59, with particular reference to Exodus 34.6-7 and its parallels.

Before proceeding to the main body of this paper, I think it appropriate to offer further clarification in one important area. My primary purpose in this essay is to examine what the Old Testament implies about the principles and practice of marriage in its own terms and context, as far as these can be determined. This is in many ways, therefore, a ground-clearing or preparatory study which will not engage to any great extent with the subsequent theology or practice of marriage in Christian (or, for that matter, Jewish or Muslim) circles. This is not in any way to deny the legitimacy or relevance of these. They are of course, and in their own contexts, legitimate developments. But they are constrained by various cultural, ideological and ethical parameters which are not internal to the Old Testament, but have been used to re-interpret that primary source. To go back to the source itself, then, can be liberating: it can show us possibilities in the source material which may have been narrowed by later readings, and it can by contrast indicate where seemingly incontrovertible rules of Christian marriage have their basis in arguably dubious Old Testament conventions which, had it not been for the imprimatur of the early church, might well have been open to challenge. This then can give the modern church scholar an opportunity to rethink marriage in a way that is more helpful to modern society. This is not, I must emphasise, to argue that societal norms must take priority; rather it is to argue that the societal norms of the early Christian centuries ought not to be unduly privileged.

B 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 (for convenience I shall refer to this as Cr1, and its companion in Genesis 2 and 3 as Cr2) 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 offerings⁴, and also in matters of uncleanness⁵ and, interestingly, in one of the principles of selection of animals for Noah's ark⁶. Specific parallels to the use in Cr1 are to be found positively in Gen 5.2, which reiterates the theme of Cr1, and negatively in Deut 4.16, which bans the making of any 'male or female' likeness of God.

⁴ Lev 3.1, 6; 4.28, 32; 5.6.

⁵ Lev 12.5, 7; 15.33; Num 5.3

⁶ Gen 6.19; 7.3, 9, 16.

God then proceeds to bless this composite and instructs them to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and to have dominion over the other orders of creation. This injunction, with its combination of sexual fecundity with naked power, seems to be at some remove from most modern western conceptions of marriage. Moreover it is distinctly at odds with contemporary concerns about the environment, which are occasioned, ironically, by millennia of a literal application of this divine imperative. This is not the place for a discussion of these important issues: suffice to say that what might have made sense in the context of human vulnerability in the face of the irresistible power of nature (compare also the concluding chapters of Job) can hardly be applied without qualification to the way we are now. Given the need to restrict human fecundity if the planet is to have a future, it might be necessary, therefore, to establish some distance between Cr1 and our understanding of the marriage bond. For while it is a commonplace of Christian teaching to understand the injunction to procreate as being exclusive to the institution of marriage, it is not obvious that this is the implication of Genesis 1. Equally, to require that marriage only makes sense if children are produced would seem to be counter both to the need for a responsible approach to the environment and the nature of the man/woman composite as defined in Genesis. It seems safe to say, in summary, that Cr1 celebrates the physicality of human existence, its diversity-in-unity, and its relationship somehow to the essential character of the divine. It seems clear to me that this is an essential matter, of the very nature of human existence, and certainly not dependent on the establishment of individual pairings of a conjugal nature.

Turning to the second creation account (Cr2) in Genesis 2, we find an account which, though couched in quite different language, affords significant parallels with Cr1. To be precise, Yahweh first constructs woman as man's 'helper' out of his side (2.21-22) – a term, incidentally, which is by no means a signifier of subservience: the Hebrew *‘ezer* is most often used of God, as in Psalm 121 which affirms that help comes only from God. It is also found in proper names, such as Eliezer ('El's Helper') or Obadiah ('Helper of Yahweh'). Next, 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. While this is not an unreasonable interpretation, it fails to deal with the fact that what is affirmed in v.23 is a pre-existing unity (compare the remarks above on Cr1). The primeval couple are one, and so any future coupling both mimics that origin and is in some sense driven by it. 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 Cr1 and Cr2 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 Cr1 and Cr2. 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 Old Testament.

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 Exodus 21.10 and Deuteronomy 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 property⁷. But these rights are within the gift of significant men: fathers, husbands, brothers and brothers-in-law, and sons, and the same

⁷ Num 26.33; 27.1-11; 36.1-12.

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 the prophet fears will take place when such norms are violated. In the passages under consideration they can be spoils of war (Deuteronomy 21.10-14), sold by their fathers (Exodus 21.7), raped by predatory men (Deuteronomy 22.28-29), sent packing when their face no longer fits (Exodus 21.7-11, Deuteronomy 24.1-4), subjected to humiliating virginity tests (Deuteronomy 22.13-21), and expected to endure a judicial test process should their husband even suspect infidelity (Numbers 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 Law⁸. This is found in one legal passage, Deuteronomy 25.5-10, which concludes with the enigmatic term of opprobrium 'the house of him whose sandal was pulled off'. 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 former, Judah (clearly no innocent) is tricked by his daughter-in-law, posing as a prostitute, following the failure of Judah's third son to perform the duty of a *yabam*: the resulting children (twins) 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 these at the very least irregular relationships within its central theological discourse.

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 euphemism⁹. The principal link between Ruth and the Levirate law is found in the curious sandal episode in Ruth 4.7-8, though scholars are not agreed as to what the connection is, if any. The problem is that the supposed relative is not described using the technical language from Deuteronomy and there is no reference to him where it might be expected, at the point of Ruth's husband's death. The root used in Ruth is *ga'al*, which is not found elsewhere in connection with Levirate law. Boaz is described as a *go'el* of Ruth's (literally, 'redeemer'), while another kinsman is a more closely related *go'el* (Ruth 3.12). The narrative

⁸ The relevant root is found in the following forms: (1) as a verb, *yabam* 'to cohabit with a deceased brother's wife' (Gen 38.8; Deut 25.5, 7); (2) as a masculine noun, *yabam* 'brother-in-law' – strictly speaking, 'husband's brother' (Deut 25.5, 7); and as a feminine noun, *yebamah* 'sister-in-law' – to be precise, 'brother's wife' in Deut 25.7, 9, though the other instance in Ruth 1.15 expresses the relationship between Ruth and Orpah.

⁹ The Hebrew for foot (*regel*) is used as a euphemism for genitalia in a number of places; like all euphemisms, it can be over-interpreted – anyone familiar with the number of such expressions for the male genitalia in English will understand the problem. As Freud once remarked, 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.'

continues to refer to the process as one of redemption¹⁰ (the verb *ga'al*), and what is to be redeemed is primarily land. This fits with the likelihood that the primary purpose of this law is to ensure the continuity of property within a family. Thus in the judgment concerning the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27.1-11 and 36.1-12 the Hebrew word *shem* ('name') is interchangeable with 'inheritance' and 'property', showing that continuity of 'the name' is equivalent to the preservation of property rights. While this may seem depressingly utilitarian, it is certainly in keeping with a dominant function of marriage within propertied classes in Europe up to and including the present day.

Deborah Rooke summarises the situation elegantly in her helpful review of the legal status of women in Ancient Israel:

In the patriarchal and patrilineal structure of Israelite society, marriage was characterized by the woman being bound to her husband in a legal relationship that gave him the sole and absolute right of use of her sexual capacity. Adultery consisted of a woman who was married or betrothed having sex with a man other than her husband, and was a grave sin for three reasons. First, it was an act of rebellion against the proper social and cosmic order, because it was a flouting of the husband's claim to his wife's sexuality and therefore of his authority; secondly, it jeopardized the purity of the husband's blood-line; and thirdly, it challenged the husband's manhood because it implied that he was unable either to engender respectful obedience in his wife or to protect her from the designs of another man.¹¹

3 THE SONG OF SONGS

This astonishing erotic poem contains a striking range of language to do with the expression of love between a man and a woman. Here are 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>'achot</i>	4.9,10,12; 5.1,2

¹⁰ NRSV uses the expressions 'kinsman' or 'next-of-kin' (Ruth 2.20; 3.9, 12; 4.1, 3, 6, 8, 14) and 'act as next of kin' (Ruth 3.13) where the Hebrew uses the root *ga'al*; in other places NRSV translates the root literally (Ruth 4.4, 6. See also *ge'ulah* 'right of redemption' (Ruth 4.6, 7).

¹¹ Deborah Rooke, 'Wayward Women and Broken Promises' in Kreizer and Rooke, 2000 (17-52; especially pp. 17-32).

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; I will content myself with the simple observation 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, or the 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.'¹²

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; not, as in so many English versions, a 'good' or 'capable' woman¹³. 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 wisdom¹⁴, and indeed for that understanding of wisdom which sees her as the source of the essential knowledge of God without which society would crumble.

¹² Hebrew has the straightforward word for 'breasts' here. Interestingly, and relevant to my remark about prurience, 19th century and early 20th century translations replace this with 'love' or 'affection', though the AV – often more down to earth – used 'breasts'.

¹³ The same description is found in Ruth 3.11, where the same observation may be appropriate, for Ruth is evidently a strong and determined woman, and Prov 12.4

¹⁴ 31.10 compare 3.15 and 8.11; 31.11 compare 3.5; 31.25a compare Ps 104.1; 31.26 gives a direct comparison with wisdom and teaching; 31.27 compare 9.5, 17; 31.30b compare 1.7; 31.31b compare 1.20 and 8.1-3.

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. This is an important observation in our attempt to tease out lines of approach to the Old Testament's understanding of marriage, for it reminds us that the picture is much more complex and nuanced than is implied in the kind of male-female relationships normative in so-called 'traditional' marriage.

5 PSALM 128

The Psalms are curiously lacking in reference to family life in general and to the feminine in particular. However, within the Psalms of Ascents (120-132) there are two which touch on the subject. Psalm 131 makes reference to the child's experience of being weaned; beyond that charming picture of a small child content at its mother's breast¹⁵, it has little to contribute to our subject. Psalm 128 is more interesting with its portrait of domestic bliss in the household of the man (*sic*) who fears Yahweh. While at first sight there appears to be a clash with the theme of Proverbs 31, a closer examination of the relevant verses (3-4) reveals something more at work:

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.

The word translated 'within' here really means something like 'at the heart of' or 'in the remotest recesses of'. It is the term used for Jonah's retreat to his secluded cabin in the boat he takes from Joppa (1.5), and it has a sense of remoteness in other texts. This suggests that the metaphorical character of the wife in Psalm 128 is more complex than a superficial reading might imply. Is this a traditional picture of the dutiful child-bearing wife safely tucked away out of sight in the inner quarters of the house, or does it hint at a powerful source of prosperity at the very centre of everything the household stands for? The images deployed – the vine and the olive – suggest the latter; for the fruitful vine is elsewhere a metaphor for Israel, and the olive is a symbol of prosperity and hope. The first sign of renewed life the dove brings back to the ark is an olive leaf, and parallels to the metaphor in this psalm can be found in Ps 52.8 and Hosea 14.6. With regard to the vine, there are important parallels in Psalm 80 and Ezekiel 19 which picture Israel as a vine brought out of Egypt offering

¹⁵ Even this is not the whole story. The Hebrew is in fact ambiguous, and the meaning may rather be that, having suckled for up to three years, a child when weaned might be fretful and unhappy!

protection and prosperity to the land, with Ezekiel in particular taking up the maternal image:

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.

Psalm 80.8-11

Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard
transplanted by the water,
fruitful and full of branches
from abundant water.

Ezekiel 19.10

Taking into account also the famous 'Song of the vineyard' in Isaiah 5.1-7, it becomes apparent that the seemingly everyday domestic scene presented in Psalm 128 is of much more significance, suggesting through allusions which would have been familiar to readers of scripture in antiquity that the wife of the God-fearer is no mute cipher to be hidden away indoors, but an embodiment of the very soul of Israel as she was chosen by God and given her inheritance in Canaan.

6 NEGATIVE ACCOUNTS¹⁶

The accounts given in 3, 4 and 5 above are positive and life-enhancing, but the writers of the Hebrew Bible were equally capable of using the semantic field of marriage and the relationship between a man and a woman in disturbingly negative ways as a metaphor for Israel's denial of God and God's corresponding anger. The most striking are Ezekiel 16 and 23, Jeremiah 3.1-5 and 3.6-14, and Hosea 1-3. They fall into two groups: Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 3.1-5, dealing with the theme of the wife who abandons her husband for other lovers and the attendant natural disasters; and Ezekiel 16 and 23 and Jeremiah 3.6-14 which present Israel and Judah as two (equally?) dissolute sisters for whom there may or may not be some hope of redemption. These have been extensively discussed by scholars, and they have very obvious metaphoric force. What is of interest for the present essay is whether they point to any relevant social reality in Ancient Israel. The Hosea material in particular has been extensively studied, and has attracted some interest from ethically conservative writers for its apparent

¹⁶ Rooke, 2000: 32-43 provides a very helpful resumé of the relevant prophetic passages, showing clearly just how negative they are, and how completely they build upon and endorse the subordinate, 'wholly-owned' legal status of women.

message about the sanctity of traditional marriage. However its complexities and moral ambivalence make it difficult to use. Is it an uplifting example of persistent love, or a sexist tract devoted to the denigration of women? While it is commonly presented as the former, Yvonne Sherwood's impressive feminist analysis in *The Prostitute and the Prophet: Reading Hosea in the Late Twentieth Century* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) needs to be kept in mind as a reminder that all is not simple in this disturbing text. What is particularly disturbing about the Hosea passage is that for it to make sense it seems that that prophet has actually acted on the scenario set out by God; in the material from Ezekiel and Jeremiah it is clear that the terms of the discourse are metaphoric. Jeremiah 3.1 differs from Hosea in that it starts from the legal situation of divorce (also referred to in 3.8), whereas Hosea is instructed to marry someone who is already a prostitute. A few other passages take up the motif of divorce – notably Isaiah 50.1 and Malachi 2.13-16 – a topic I shall return to in the next section.

The allegory in Jeremiah 3.1-5 is confused. It starts from the law that a man may not remarry his divorced wife, seemingly because, if she had subsequently had another partner, it would be tantamount to adultery. But by the middle of verse one the allegory has changed to that of the promiscuous woman whose sexual behaviour has brought about a radical disruption to the fertility of the land (vv.2b-3). Verse four introduces the motif of the 'partner of one's youth' – found several other passages – which seems to provide the basis for some faint hope of reconciliation (v.5). Given that the whole of this is a cipher for Judah, there is little to be gleaned from it about sexual or marital relations in that society: it is a typically bravura prophetic performance which reveals much about stereotypical male fears and nothing of value about the real world¹⁷, beyond the truism that prostitution is frowned upon!

Hosea 1-3 provides a more extended version of this theme, including the threat to the agricultural health of the land (especially 2.8-12). As we have already noted, the underlying proposition is so unusual that it can hardly be used as the basis of any analysis of the marriage bond in ancient Israel. Much has been made of the use of the key expression 'covenant' (*berit*) in 2.18; but given that the prophet's curious family life is a direct allegory for God's dealings with Israel, it is stretching the evidence to apply this term to the understanding of marriage as such in the Old Testament. The following verses provide a roll call of theological language – righteousness, justice, steadfast love, mercy and faithfulness – and however attractive it might be to deduce from this an elevated conception of marriage, this surely goes far beyond evidence. If anything it suggests that Yahweh, *unlike* mere human husbands, offers these additional benefits to those who remain faithful to God. Nevertheless, as an ideal to aspire

¹⁷ It is undeniable that many commentators have waxed eloquent on the dangers of sexual promiscuity and the threats of supposed 'Canaanite' religious practices. A more sober evaluation, however, suggests that ancient Canaan and Israel were no more (or less) prone to sexual misbehaviour than any other human society. See Rooke, 2000: 36 (fn 42) for detailed references.

to, it has something to say to us, and I will return to it in the §D and the conclusion.

I referred above to the idea of the 'companion (or partner) of one's youth'. It is worth spending a moment on this almost throw-away theme, since it might actually have a social context familiar from many early societies: namely, pre-pubertal betrothal. The instances of relevance are:

Isaiah 54.6	Jeremiah 2.2; 3.4	Ezekiel 16.60
Joel 1.8	Malachi 2.14,15	Proverbs 2.17; 5.18

The terms directly associated with 'youth' are:

'wife' (*'ishshah*) in Isaiah 54.6; Malachi 2.14,15; and Proverbs 5.18

'companion' (*'alluf*) in Jeremiah 3.4 and Proverbs 2.17 (It is worth pointing out that this word more commonly refers to a friend, ally or confidante; only in these two instances does it indicate a partner – perhaps a small sign that in some circumstances a life partner might also be a friend?)

'covenant' (*berit*) in Ezekiel 16.60; Malachi 2.14; and Proverbs 2.14

'husband' (*ba'al*) in Joel 1.8

'betrothal' (*kelulot*), 'loyalty' (*chesed*) and 'love' (*'ahavah*) in Jeremiah 2.2

What emerges is, I would argue, evidence of the practice of betrothal at an early age: the word for youth (*ne'urim*) is of unclear reference, but probably indicates a very early stage in life – something like the beginning of personal responsibility. Interestingly, none of the narrative accounts in the Old Testament seem to indicate early betrothal, though the custom was common in many pre-modern societies. None of the passages is clear enough to enable any firm conclusion, and the range of vocabulary is too diverse to allow a precise delineation. Moreover the presence of certain key theological terms – principally 'covenant' and 'loyalty' – might alert us to a metaphoric rather than literal usage. This is certainly true of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and probably Malachi. Proverbs 2.14 has also been seen in metaphoric terms as a warning against the strange deities of Canaan, so there too the use of *berit* might have only limited relevance to marriage.

Jeremiah 3.6-14 adopts a position used elsewhere in the Old Testament of citing the sins of Israel only to highlight the even worse sins of Judah. The best-known version of this trope is probably that found in Amos 1-2, though in reverse: for here the principal offender is Israel, to whom the prophet addresses his oracles, and Judah is cited as the lesser offender in order the more effectively to damn Israel (especially 2.4-16). Amos, however, makes very limited use of the charge of sexual immorality (2.7), focusing much more on general accusations of wide-ranging oppressive behaviour. For this reason the only parallel to Jeremiah 3.6-14 I shall take up in the current study is Ezekiel 16 and 23, where a remarkably similar scenario is presented, albeit much more extensively.

Our more limited question is, what relevance if any do these debates have to the institution of marriage in the Old Testament? Jeremiah uses a range of vocabulary keyed to the theme of sexual unfaithfulness: the verb *zanah*, 'to prostitute oneself', and its associated noun, 'prostitute'; the verb *na'aph*, 'to commit adultery'; terms for 'faithless' (*meshuvah* – ironically from the same root from which 'repentance' is derived) and false (*bagodah*, verb *bagad* 'to betray' 'be disloyal'¹⁸); and of course the legal expression 'bill of divorce' (on which see further in §C.5). But these do not take us any further than the rather uncontroversial observation that adultery and prostitution were frowned upon, and women who practised them regarded as having betrayed their husbands who were accordingly within their rights in divorcing them. As we shall see when we examine divorce in particular, this is never an option open to women; nor is men's philandering subject to anything like the same level of opprobrium and prophetic abuse.¹⁹ The theme of the faithless or disloyal woman is pretty much unique to this passage (it is echoed once more, in Jeremiah 3.20, and is hinted at in Hosea 5.7). However, the opposite scenario, where a man betrays his duty towards his wife, is given expression legally in Exodus 21.8 and as an extended metaphor in Malachi 2.10-16 – a passage which we have already noted and to which I shall return²⁰. The conclusion of this element of our exegesis must surely be that the idea of loyalty and reliability is part of the understanding of marriage in Israel: not perhaps a surprising conclusion, but worth stating formally.

Ezekiel's treatment of these themes takes the subject to grotesque extremes. The sixty-three verses of chapter 16 are devoted to a lascivious portrayal of Judah's dubious origins (vv.1-5), rescue through marriage to Yahweh (vv.6-14), her resorting to adultery and prostitution (vv.15-34), God's subsequent judgment (vv.35-43), and a comparison (unfavourable to Judah) with her 'sisters' Sodom and Samaria. The chapter concludes, perhaps surprisingly, with a prediction of a restoration and a renewal of God's covenant with Judah. Chapter 23 is even more depressing – an unrelieved catalogue of the sexual adventures of two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah, explicitly named as Samaria and Judah. This time there is no concluding redemption, and the principal

¹⁸ One further juxtaposition is noteworthy: the disloyalty of Judah in 3.11 is followed tellingly in 3.12 with a reference to the loyalty (*chesed*) of Yahweh in a clear echo of the familiar belief in God's mercy which is first enunciated in Ex 34.6-7, and which I will discuss later.

¹⁹ Some of the material in Prov 1-9 (specifically 2.16-19; 5.3-20; 7) warn of the dangers of consorting with 'strange' or 'loose' women, and the fate that awaits men who so dally. But the emphasis remains on the woman: her devious, flattering, seductive and in the end deadly nature which assumes that the man is essentially a victim. Hardly adequate to balance the scales of metaphoric injustice.

²⁰ It might be helpful to summarise the distribution of the relevant Hebrew terms at this point. In Jer 3 the English term 'faithless' is used almost exclusively for *meshuvah* and *shovav* (in vv.6,8,11,12,14 and 22). These terms are not used elsewhere in the context of a sexually faithless woman. The expression with which it is paired, *bagad*, 'to be disloyal to', 'to betray' is found in Ex 21.8 and Mal 2.14,15 and 16 with reference to a man's disloyalty to his wife; in Jer 3.7, 8, 10, 11 and 20 with reference to a woman's disloyalty to her husband – though, to be precise, 3.20 should be translated 'as a woman is disloyal to her companion'; and in Jer 9.2, Hos 5.7, and Mal 2.10 and 11 with reference to the people as a whole behaving like a faithless wife.

message – like that of Jeremiah 3 and Ezekiel 16 – is that, however awful Samaria is, Judah is even worse.

It may seem unproductive to devote so much space to these ancient expressions of hatred for women – a hatred which is scarcely excused by its metaphoric burden. But many readers and observers have fastened on to such writings as the basis for drastic warnings about consequences of marital breakdown. My conclusion is that they are too extreme, too hate-filled, and too focused on a single metaphoric context to be reliable witnesses to any real state of affairs either in ancient Israel or, by extension, in modern society. Male fears about female sexuality and women's ownership of that sexuality do not form a sound basis for a theology of marriage or an ethic for modern Christian life.

C Custom and practice

1 TO MARRY

There are four Hebrew terms 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"]'. Second, 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. The third term is the verb *'aras*, occurring ten times²¹. Commonly translated as 'betrothal', *'aras* is defined in the most modern dictionary²² as 'desire'; 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. Finally the root *chathan* (other forms of which refer to marriage relationships like father/son-in-law) occurs in a few places²³. The verb form used is the *hithpael* – 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 Deuteronomy 7, Joshua 23 and Ezra 9; Solomon and Pharaoh's daughter in 1 Kings 3; Jehoshaphat and

²¹ Ex 22.15; Deut 20.7; 22.23, 25, 27, 28; 28.30; 2 Sam 3.14; Hos 2.21, 22

²² D. J. A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. Volume 1 (Aleph), Sheffield Academic Press, 1993.

²³ Gen 34.9; Deut 7.3; Josh 23.12; 1 Sam 18.21, 22, 23, 26, 27; 1 Kings 3.1; Ezra 9.14; and 2 Chr 18.1.

Ahab in 2 Chronicles 18²⁴. Only in 1 Samuel 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.

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 dealing respectively with Abraham's quest for a wife for Isaac, Jacob's negotiations with Laban regarding Rachel, and Hamor's approach to Jacob regarding Dinah and Shechem.

2 THE DOWRY

There is a scattering of references to the dowry or bride-price suggesting that the father of the potential bride would expect a payment of some kind. There is reference to the 'bride-price' (*mohar*) in Genesis 34.12; Exodus 22.17; and 1 Samuel 18.25. The corresponding verb (*mahar*) is found only in Exodus 22.16. The only legal context is Exodus 22.16-17, with a parallel in Deuteronomy 22.29 which sets the price explicitly at fifty shekels. Hosea 3.2 indicates a payment of fifteen shekels by the prophet to redeem Gomer from prostitution: perhaps a cut-price dowry! In the other two cases, Shechem offers to pay Jacob whatever price he pleases for Dinah, while Saul notoriously demands the foreskins of a hundred Philistines in return for Michal. It is clear that we cannot deduce much on the basis of these scant and eccentric sources. There is not enough evidence to derive any kind of scale of charges, 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 its occurrence in Israel would not be surprising.

3 WEDDING CUSTOMS

The Old Testament affords only limited evidence of the customs associated with marriage. Formal wedding ceremonies are not attested, though if Psalm 45, as is usually assumed, an epithalamion (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

²⁴ The latter might not appear to refer to intermarriage, but it should be noted that Israel and Judah were effectively separate kingdoms. The more radical of modern historians of the period have argued further that the so-called 'united monarchy' was a later fiction, and that the two states were genuinely distinct until the late post-exilic Maccabean era.

interestingly does not realise his mistake until the morning (no doubt drink was taken)! There are political shenanigans associated with Saul's giving David his daughter Michal as a wife (1 Samuel 18.17-29), but no ceremony. Later, in 1 Samuel 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 Samuel 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, and 1 Maccabees 1.27 speaks of 'she who sat in the bridal chamber'. It is tempting to associate these with common traditions of marriage, where the couple are kept separate until the moment of the wedding (the practice in Islam as well). The reference to a canopy suggests later Jewish practice; but it is in fact quite different, for in later custom both the bride and the groom stand beneath the same canopy for their nuptials. Psalm 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 61.10, Jer 2.32, and possibly also Ezekiel 16.8-14 refer to ornaments that a bride and bridegroom would wear, while Isaiah 62.5 and Jeremiah 7.34 (= 16.9; 25.10; and 33.11) hint at an occasion when the bridegroom 'rejoices over the bride'. Anointing with oil is referred to in Ezekiel 16.9, Ruth 3.3, Psalm 45.7-8 and Song of Songs 1.3 and 4.9-14, though the contexts are quite diverse and do not really add up to an obvious rite within marriage itself.

In the apocryphal book of Tobit, 7.13, there is mention of 'a marriage contract, to the effect that he [Raguel] gave her [Sarah] to him [Tobias] as wife according to the decree of the law of Moses'. It is not clear, however, what this decree is, and there is no reference to it in the Old Testament. Somewhat later, in 8.19-21, there is an account of a feast given by Raguel to celebrate the wedding, and generous parting gifts to Tobias. These cannot be taken to be normative, however, given the narrative context of Tobias's defeat of the demon which had tormented Sarah. They look more like an expression of Raguel's gratitude in the specific circumstances than an expression of customary wedding practice.

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 simple as 'she doesn't please me any more'²⁵. Admittedly we noted references to unfaithfulness and disloyalty in §B.6, and some use of the word covenant. But none seem to form part of any agreement at the point of

²⁵ While this is perfectly in harmony with contemporary law on divorce, and is welcome to that extent, we must nevertheless remember that it was *only* available to men in ancient Israel.

marriage, and unfaithfulness is predominantly a description of women who leave their husbands.

4 RELATIONSHIP TERMS

For completeness I record here the main marriage-based relationship terms which are recorded in the Old Testament. They are probably of more interest to anthropologists than theologians, and they are quite selective, in that only a limited number of possible relationships are covered.

- 4.1 The term *kallah* is translated about equally often as 'bride' or 'daughter-in-law'²⁶.
- 4.2 There is a word 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 – *cham* – which 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.
- 4.3 The root *chathan* 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. The meaning 'groom' 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 and groom; the Joel and Psalms citations refer to the canopy which was discussed above. 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'. The meaning son-in-law, is purely factual and offers no information of use to our current study²⁷. Finally, in another form the root means 'father-in-law' (*chothen*). Grammatically this is an active participle, perhaps indicating the one responsible for bringing about the marriage. Again, no other significance is indicated²⁸, 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.
- 4.4 Concubines (*pilegesh*) are also known. While they are obviously not wives in any sense that would be acceptable today, they clearly form part of the

²⁶ The relevant passages are, respectively, Isa 49.18; 61.10; 62.5; Jer 2.32; 7.34; 16.9; 25.10; 33.11; Joel 2.16; Song 4.8, 9, 10, 11, 12; 5.1; and Gen 11.31; 38.11, 16, 24; Lev 18.15; 20.12; 1 Sam 4.19; Ezek 22.11; Hos 4.13, 14; Mic 7.6; Ruth 1.6, 7, 8, 22; 2.20, 22; 4.15; 1 Chr 2.4.

²⁷ Gen 19.12, 14; Judg 15.6; 19.5; 1 Sam 18.18; 22.14; 2 Kings 8.27; Neh 6.18; 13.28.

²⁸ Ex 3.1; 4.18; 18.1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 17, 24, 27 (all referring to Jethro); Num 10.29; Judg 1.16; 4.11; (Hobab – another name for Moses' father-in-law); 19.4, 7, 9 (the father of the Levite's concubine).

normal structures of family life (at least in upper class circles) in ancient Israel²⁹, and the term should therefore be included in this brief catalogue.

5 DIVORCE

There are three expressions in Hebrew which cover what English means by divorce. The most technical, found in Deuteronomy 24.1 and 3, is 'bill of divorce' (*sepher kerithut*) – literally 'a written declaration of "cutting"'. The same root is found in a perhaps related idiomatic phrase, 'to make (literally "cut") a covenant (*berit*)'. While I observed above (in §B.6) that there is no strong evidence that the idea of covenant was integral to marriage in any formal way, it could be that this negative concept indicates the undoing of a binding agreement. The same phrase recurs in Isaiah 50.1 where Judah is portrayed, apparently, as a sinful wife who has been divorced, and in Jeremiah 3.8, where a similar metaphor is used of Israel. No further information is given about the nature of this 'bill of divorce'; we have no idea what its wording might have been, and no light is shed by the later Hebrew word *get*, an Aramaic borrowing used in rabbinic law.

The second term is *gerushah* which refers specifically to a woman who has been 'driven out'³⁰ (the modern business euphemism 'let go' comes to mind), and so is 'divorced'. It is found in legal material (Leviticus 21.7, 14; 22.13 and Numbers 30.9) and is echoed in the cultic provisions in Ezekiel 44.22. It is uninformative about the process of divorce, since it simply assumes that that status applies to some women. However there are two perhaps significant uses of the underlying verb *garash* 'to expel', 'to drive out' which merit at least passing comment. In Genesis 3.24 God 'drove out [divorced?] the man' from Eden – perhaps the only instance, albeit metaphorical, of a man being divorced in the Bible. And in Genesis 21.10 Sarah, incensed at Hagar's seeming attempt to usurp her place as first wife, orders Abraham to 'cast out [divorce?] this slave woman [she cannot bring herself to speak her name] with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac'. Might this be used as evidence for female-instigated divorce within the context of a polygamous family? Even if it could be so used, it would be of little help in providing guidelines for contemporary Christian society.

Thirdly we find a form of the very common verb *shalach* which has the basic meaning of 'to stretch out', 'to let loose', 'to let go'. In a few places most English versions translate 'to divorce', though obviously this is a translation decision based on context rather than a one-to-one semantic match. The relevant

²⁹ Eleven of the occurrences are in the horrendous story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 and 20. The others are Gen 22.24; 25.6; 35.22; 36.12; Judg 8.31; 2 Sam 3.7; 5.13; 15.16; 16.21, 22; 19.6; 20.3; 21.11; 1 Kings 11.3; Ezek 23.20; Song 6.8, 9; Esth 2.14; 1 Chr 1.32; 2.46, 48; 3.9; 7.14; 2 Chr 11.21.

³⁰ The root is *garash* which is used most often for the driving out of other nations in the face of God's plan to give Canaan to the Israelites. The form used here is a passive participle; there is, tellingly, no masculine equivalent. Biblical Hebrew does not have an expression for a divorced man.

passages are: Deuteronomy 22.19, 29; 24.1, 3, 4; and Malachi 2.16. In the first two NRSV uses 'divorce'; in the second three the reading is 'send away' (though the Hebrew is the same). The Malachi instance refers to a practice of 'divorcing' which it condemns without any further explanation. Essentially what is referred to here is the right of a man to send away his wife if she does not please him³¹, or (in Deuteronomy 22) the withdrawal of that right in certain circumstances.

6 MALACHI AND DIVORCE

I have referred several times to an oracle in Malachi 2.10-16 in which several of the themes of this paper are represented. A brief summary of its content will help to reveal its significance for the subject of marriage.

The oracle begins with a general complaint about the disloyalty (*bagad*) of Judah and its profanation of the covenant. This segues immediately into the trope, found also in Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, of the sexual disloyalty of Judah – but represented, unusually, as a husband. The genders in verse eleven are somewhat confused: the (female) Judah has been disloyal, the (male) Judah has profaned the sanctuary which Yahweh loves (*'ahav*), and has married (*ba'al*) the daughter of a foreign god. Verses twelve and thirteen are silent on the marriage metaphor, but it returns powerfully in verse fourteen:

The Lord was a witness (*he'id*) between you and the wife of your youth to whom you have been disloyal though she is your companion (*chaverah*) and your wife by covenant.

Regarding the terminology in these verses, several have been discussed previously (*bagad* – 'disloyal'; *ba'al* – 'to marry'; 'wife of your youth'), and 'love' will be examined in the next section. Two other ideas seem to be unique to this passage: nowhere else in the Old Testament is there any reference to the witnessing of a marriage, and this is the only place where the term *chaverah* ('companion') is used of a marriage partner. While it is attractive to deduce from the former evidence for later practice in public marriage ceremony, the highly metaphorical nature of Malachi 2.10-16 makes this dubious. The latter term figures largely in Chasidic Judaism – there are extensive references to *chaverim* in Mishnah, but with the meaning of those who share a Pharisaic religious outlook. This therefore seems to be a singularity, like the use of *rea'* ('neighbour', 'companion') in Jeremiah 3.20 for 'husband'.

The phrase 'your wife by covenant', linked as it is to 'wife of your youth' cannot fail to call to mind Proverbs 2.16-17. The other use of 'covenant' of possible relevance is Hosea 2.18. I looked briefly at these in B6, where I remarked that in two of the occurrences there is an emphasis on Yahweh's relationship with

³¹ The grounds given in Deuteronomy 24.1 are that he finds in her *'ervath davar*, an expression whose meaning is far from clear. AV has 'some uncleanness'; NIV has 'something indecent'; and NRSV has 'something objectionable'. The most common meaning of the word *'ervah* is 'nakedness' – with a possible implication of shame.

Judah, while the one in Proverbs seems to be part of a warning against false worship. This suggests that, in Hebrew society at least, there was no normative use of 'covenant' as an aspect of marriage. However, given the signal importance of the term *berit* in the Old Testament, it will be appropriate to resume this discussion in §F, where I will examine a few tentative theological points.

Verse fifteen is complex and puzzling. It is far from clear precisely what it means; indeed, it is possible that what Yahweh seeks is 'offspring of the gods'; or at the very least, 'godlike' offspring. The NRSV reading 'godly offspring' is seriously misleading, as is the AV's 'godly seed'³². Whether we can read out of Malachi 2.15 any divine injunction regarding the purpose of marriage being for procreation is dubious, for what God is addressing here is the failure of the theologically significant union of Judah with his symbolic partner. The verse then concludes with a repetition of the demand of Judah not to be disloyal to the wife of his youth.

The concluding verse of this oracle fails to clarify what become exceedingly obscure! 'I hate *shallach* says Yahweh': but what is this? While another part of the same verb is sometimes translated as 'to divorce', as we have seen in the last paragraph of 5, above, it is by no means obvious that we should use such a legal term here. And the parallel with 'covering one's garment with violence' (for which there are no equivalents anywhere in the Old Testament) only serves to render the whole impossible to interpret. We can be sure that Yahweh is angry, that he is angry with Judah, and that it is to do with Judah's treatment of his childhood betrothed. But we do not even know who that is. Who is the female 'other' in this allegory? The cult? The Temple? Yahweh in feminine form? The mystery remains; only one thing seems certain – that it would be ill-advised to construct on such a basis anything about the practical nature of marriage, divorce, and God's attitude to divorce in the Old Testament.

D Emotion as real experience and metaphor

1 HUMAN LOVE

If the law, such as it is, and the relevant narratives stand in contrast (see §B 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

³² The phrase is of a type found a few times elsewhere in Hebrew, in which *'elohim* or *'el* serve apparently as adjectives. In other instances, where the literal 'of God/the gods' is deemed to be inappropriate, NRSV understands an indication of something of extreme or unusual quality. Thus, for example 'mighty cedars' (Psalm 80.10) or 'mighty wind' (Genesis 1.2, footnote). There is a similar instance in Jonah 3.3, which NRSV translates as 'Nineveh was an *exceedingly large* city'. In any case, the translation 'godly' is not likely: there are no other instances of *'elohim* used in this way.

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.

The fundamental term for 'to love' 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.

The sexual act is most commonly referred to using one of two verbs: 'to know' (*yada*^c) – hence the popular joke about 'knowing in the Biblical sense – and 'to go into' (*ba*'). 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 2.9³³) may reinforce the continuum of emotional experience implied by the way the Old Testament uses *'ahav*. The third common term which is used is 'to lie with' (*shakav*) – again reminiscent of the English euphemism 'to sleep with'³⁴.

Parental love is clearly in evidence, from the traumatic testing of that love in Genesis 22³⁵, 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)³⁶. 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 and 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

³³ Many commentators have pointed out that the syntax in this famous phrase is peculiar. It is more than possible that the text originally simply read 'the tree of knowing [presumably of sexual knowledge]', and that the concluding phrase, which transformed it into a matter of ethical knowledge, was added subsequently. Certainly the story is at one level about the loss of sexual innocence, and its correlates in Mesopotamian myth – e.g. the Epic of Gilgamesh – have a similar theme.

³⁴ As an aside, in the couple of verses where Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph, she uses the verb *ba*' twice as well as *shakav* ('My husband has brought among us a Hebrew ... He came into me to lie with me ...'), and to add insult deploys a third term, often translated 'to mock or taunt', *tsachaq*, which has clear undertones of a sexual kind. For those interested I have included a comment on this word in Appendix 3.

³⁵ There are of course many ways to read the baffling account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac; nevertheless Abraham's love for Isaac is not in question.

³⁶ Brecht's play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is based on the same premise, though with a twist.

proverbial, while the daughters of Noah indulge a dark passion for their father (Gen 19.30-38).

2 WOMBS AND COMPASSION

One of the most important characteristics of God in the Old Testament is mercy or compassion (*rachamim*). This emphasis is also present in Islam where the most important attributes of Allah, used at the beginning of every Surah in the Q'uran, are 'the compassionate' (*ar-rachman*) and 'the merciful' (*al-rachim*) – terms which are etymologically cognate with the Hebrew.

There is a very useful study of the relevant Hebrew in Phyllis Trible's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (see note 3, above, and the related discussion), which highlights just how important this concept is for the Old Testament's understanding of God. Bearing in mind the importance generally of passionate concern within human relationships, it is worth exploring these terms more fully here.

I begin with the adjective 'merciful' (*rachum*) – the primary focus of Trible's analyses. It figures in a very well-known saying about God's compassion or mercy which finds its fullest expression in Exodus 34.6-7:

The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation.

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 (Psalms 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 Deuteronomy 4.31; Joel 2.13; Jonah 4.2; Nehemiah 9.17, 31; Psalms 86.15; 103.8 111.4; 145.8; 2 Chronicles 30.9.) Clearly this is an exclusively divine aspect, and one whose importance can hardly be exaggerated. It is a measure of its significance, perhaps, that Jonah – that most cantankerous of prophets – finds that he has to complain to God about God's unfortunate tendency to show mercy and compassion where (in Jonah's opinion) robust punishment would be in order. Thus Jonah 4.1-3:

But this was very displeasing to Jonah [i.e., God's forgiving of Nineveh] and he became angry. He prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD! Is not

this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. And now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

The verb and noun from the same root: 'to be compassionate' (*racham*) and 'compassion' (*rachamim*), are like *rachum*, highly specific to Yahweh, being with very few exceptions the property of God (either showing or withholding compassion). Where they are not it is usually because God has permitted some other power either to show or to deny compassion³⁷.

The concrete term *rechem*, which is translated mostly as 'womb', is arguably the basis of the metaphoric terms relating to mercy and compassion which we have considered above³⁸. It 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'³⁹. The third (in Lam 5.10) is in a quite different metaphorical context not relevant to our discussion.

³⁷ For *racham* the relevant 'God' passages are Ex 33.10; Deut 13.17; 30.3; 1 Kings 8.50; 2 Kings 13.23; Isa 9.16; 14.1; 27.11; 30.18; 49.10, 13; 54.8; 55.7; 60.10; Jer 12.15; 13.14; 30.18; 31.30; 33.26; Hos 1.6, 7; 2.4, 23; 14.3; Mic 7.19; Hab 3.2; Zech 1.12; 10.6; Ps 102.13; 103.13; 116.5; Lam 3.32. There is one abstract use in Prov 28.13, one where a woman shows compassion (Isa 49.15), and one where David is the subject (Ps 18.1 – curiously omitted from the version in 2 Sam 22). The remainder, relating to alien powers, are Isa 13.18; Jer 6.23; 21., 42.12; 50.42. For *rachamim* the 'God' passages are Gen 43.14; Deut 13.17; 2 Sam 24.14; 1 Kings 8.50; Isa 54.7; 63.7, 15; Jer 16.5; 42.12; Zech 1.16; Ps 25.6; 40.11; 51.1; 69.16; 77.9; 79.8; 103.4; 119.77, 156; 145.9; Lam 3.22; Dan 9.9, 18; Neh 1.11; 9.19, 27, 28, 31; 1 Chr 21.13; 2 Chr 30.9. In one place God orders the people to be compassionate (Zech 7.9), and in four God manipulates other authorities to show or deny compassion (Isa 47.6; Amos 1.11; Ps 106.46; Dan 1.9). The remaining instance, Pr 12.10, has an abstracted character similar to that of Pr 28.13 above.

³⁸ This is not wholly uncontroversial. The 19th century standard Hebrew Lexicon (Brown, Driver & Briggs) assumes two distinct homonymic roots, one leading to 'womb' the other to 'compassion'. The weakness of this position is that there are no instances in the Hebrew Bible of the former verb *per se*. It is Tribble's starting point, and it has an inherent plausibility, that there is only one verb; the forms are all integral to one single root, and the validity of the argument from the concrete to the abstract is strong.

³⁹ It is worth incidentally noting that all three terms – 'wombs', 'compassion' and 'tenderness' are plural forms in Hebrew, thus reinforcing the similarities.

3 DIVINE AND HUMAN LOVE

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. The detailed listing in Appendix 1 of the ways that the Hebrew for ‘love’ and ‘to love’ are used demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that the same expression covers (as in English) the whole semantic field. Lust and love, passion and commitment, the sheer pleasure of relationships, desires both utterly mundane and sublimely transcendent, are given expression in the same way and 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.

The detailed discussion of *rechem* in Paragraph 2, above, illustrates this convergence between the human and the divine rather nicely. 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: these passages reveal a woman, a man, and Yahweh all expressing the same kind of passion, in the same sort of words, towards, respectively, a child, brothers, and God’s recalcitrant people. This is made all the more striking by the fact that the passionate love a man and a woman have for each other, or, indeed, that Jonathan and David have for each other, is given the same expression as God’s love for Israel in the famous passage from Deuteronomy 7.7-8:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

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 3 it is Judah 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 children⁴⁰.

E Practical conclusions

Throughout this paper I have identified evidence of what can be concluded about the nature of marriage in the Old Testament. I shall gather these various points together in this section, before going on to consider some possible theological implications.

1 LEGAL POINTS (see §B.2)

The legal material makes a number of points, not all of them positive or in keeping with contemporary mores.

1.1 It is clear (§C.1) that the subjects of verbs which can mean 'to marry' are always male. Men 'take' or 'raise' or 'desire' women as wives; fathers 'arrange' marriages between families. 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. It further seems that, at least in more well-to-do families, some kind of dowry or bride-price was paid (§C.2). This would be in keeping with custom in many societies, though it is of little relevance to contemporary debates, unless an analogy is drawn with the excessive costs of elaborate 'traditional' weddings.

1.2 Polygamy is accepted. This 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. Men not infrequently have concubines, or treat their female servants as quasi-concubines.

1.3 Women are scarcely ever portrayed as free agents, even though they may be portrayed as having effective power in some of the narrative texts. That is not to say that they do not have rights, 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.

1.4 The legal rulings on marriage effectively constitute an institutional oppression of women, something which must be completely unacceptable to the

⁴⁰ The word for 'compassion' is not found directly here. The Hebrew is a similar form, *nechumah*, meaning 'comfort', though the main critical edition of the text proposes an amendment to introduce the same noun as in the other two passages.

church today. Part of the problem is that women in the Old Testament are essentially chattels, who can legitimately be humiliated, and forced to conform to what is in essence a patriarchal view of society.

1.5 The levirate law, with its benign (?) intention to protect otherwise vulnerable women, is today a dead letter, not least because women's rights are established as (in theory) equal to those of men. Within specific applications of that law we noted that 'irregular' liaisons were no bar to family structures; thus David is (according to Ruth 4) a direct descendent of Judah's sexual relations with his daughter-in-law. Perhaps the Old Testament has something to teach us about the need to avoid petty morality in human relationships.

1.6 Our consideration of phrases of the type 'companion of one's youth' (§B.6) suggests that there is evidence for the practice of betrothal at an early age. Though none of the narrative accounts in the Old Testament seem to indicate early betrothal, the custom was common in many pre-modern societies. What is tantalising is the possibility that such a youthful partner could be seen as a friend or companion as well as husband or wife.

1.7 Regarding the wedding itself (§C.3) we find a lack of specific detail. There was almost certainly feasting, and both bride and groom might have worn special clothes and jewellery. Possibly oil was used, and there are several references to a canopy – though not as it later functions in Jewish ceremonial. The couple may have been kept apart prior to the wedding (this would seem to have been the case for Jacob), and the groom is said to rejoice (perhaps the least he could do!).

1.8 Tobit refers to a 'marriage contract ... according to the decree of the law of Moses'. It is not clear, however, what this decree is, and there is no reference to it in the Old Testament. Indeed, a 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'.

There is some limited evidence that marriage might have been seen as a covenant, but this is found only within contexts where marriage, or its breakdown, serve as metaphors for Yahweh's relationship with Judah and Israel. It will be more appropriate to consider this further in the next section.

1.9 Divorce (§§C.5 & 6). One of the hottest issues in the bible, and in the Church, is divorce. The predominant position in the Old Testament, summed up in Deuteronomy 24.1-4, is that divorce is normal, a male prerogative, and can be based on his finding fault (not clearly defined) with his wife. The production of a 'bill of divorce' is all that is required; sadly, the terms of this document are not recorded. There are some conditions, and divorced women have certain protections; but there is no right for a woman to initiate a divorce, and no indication that she could contest her husband's decision.

Today the churches for the most part at least condone divorce; some to the extent of permitting remarriage in church. The issue is, however, divisive, and there are those who would prefer an outright ban. This latter position may find some support in Malachi 2.16; my own instinct is that this is an unclear saying, and so at odds with the rest of the Old Testament, that it cannot be used in itself to redefine religious attitudes (see the discussion in C.6).

The most urgent question for the churches is, given that divorce is now widely accepted in society, and is (almost) equally available to men and women, and given that there is no evident rejection of separation in the Old Testament, what reason remains for continuing to be ambivalent? The cost to those whose marriages – for whatever reason – have ended, but who wish to remain in communion, can be considerable. Perhaps this is one of those issues where post-Hebrew custom has unhelpfully introduced norms and constraints that could well be dispensed with on a closer reading of the Bible.

1.10 Intermarriage is also practised (§C.1), between Israelites and members of neighbouring states, despite the bitter rhetoric against this. I have not explored the theme of intermarriage in any detail because it is an uncontroversial issue in the contemporary church, and the most that can be said about the Old Testament evidence is that some are very much for it, and some are inflexibly opposed.

2 LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN EMOTIONAL TERMS (see §§B.3, 4, 5)

2.1 In contrast with the legal material, there is in Song of Songs and Proverbs a frankness about, and celebration of the sheer sexual pleasure to be found in human relationships. This is refreshing, given the prurience with which we often deal with this subject, particularly in the humiliating use of the female in advertising and the media generally.

2.2 The most complete portrait we have of a marriage is in Proverbs 31. What is intriguing about it is that there is little sign of the downtrodden wife of Exodus and Deuteronomy. Here we meet the *powerful woman*: a supremely capable woman who evidently holds her family together and enables her husband to maintain his place and dignity in the public arena. That, of course, could fit contemporary arrangements where women are effective in private, but denied public recognition. But there are signs that there is more to be said, 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. Thus, 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.

2.3 When this is aligned with the seemingly everyday domestic scene presented in Psalm 128 a greater significance emerges. We discover, through allusions which would have been familiar to readers of scripture in antiquity that the wife of the God-fearer is no mute cipher to be hidden away indoors, but an embodiment of the very soul of Israel as she was chosen by God and given her inheritance in Canaan.

2.4 On the negative side, in prophetic rhetoric sexual immorality and lust stand metaphorically for the faithlessness of Judah and Israel (§B.6). While it may seem unproductive to ~~devote~~ focus on these ancient expressions of hatred for women, they have too often been used as the basis for drastic warnings about consequences of marital breakdown. This is unfortunate, since their heightened language can scarcely be a reliable witness to any real state of affairs either in ancient Israel or, by extension, in modern society. Male fears about female sexuality and women's ownership of that sexuality do not form a sound basis for a theology of marriage or an ethic for modern Christian life.

2.5 Our reflections on the Song of Songs and Proverbs made it clear that human love in its most passionate sense is integral to relationships, both positively – for example, Jacob and Rachel – and negatively, as with David and Bathsheba. Parental love is clearly in evidence, again both positively (Moses' mother, and the bereaved prostitute in 1 Kings 3) and negatively (the destructive favouritism of Jacob for Joseph), and in the other direction, Ruth's love for her mother-in-law Naomi has become proverbial (§D.1).

2.6 The analysis of the terms for 'compassion' in the Old Testament (§§D.2 & 3) uncovered revealing connections between divine and human love. Perhaps one of the most important 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.

3 SUMMARY

Implicit in this paper is a rejection of most 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.

There are a few areas where we might build on what seems to be in general a more relaxed attitude to relationships. In the introduction I wrote:

To go back to the source ... can be liberating: it can show us possibilities ... which may have been narrowed by later readings, and it can by contrast indicate where seemingly incontrovertible rules of Christian marriage have their basis in arguably dubious Old Testament conventions which, had it not been for the imprimatur of the early church, might well have been open to challenge. This then can give the modern church scholar an opportunity to rethink marriage in a way that is more helpful to modern society. This is not, I must emphasise, to argue that societal norms must take priority; rather it is to argue that the societal norms of the early Christian centuries ought not to be unduly privileged.

The intensely patriarchal assumptions of the Old Testament and its strong tendency to assume the worse of female human nature were undoubtedly reinforced by early Christianity and its social world, made worse by church attitudes which persisted until late into the 20th century and have still not entirely faded. There is nothing unfaithful to scripture in rejecting this bias; the recognition of millennia of wrong in the treatment of women is a profoundly important development which enables those features of marriage which are of value to be mutually owned. Children's nurture is not the sole responsibility of women, nor are gainful work and the stewardship of property within a relationship down to men alone.

On the positive side, I have suggested that the process of becoming married, and the nature of the emotions which bind people together, are more honestly recorded in the Old Testament – particularly as they are seen to mirror divine characteristics. The later tendency to regularise and formalise marriage and to hedge it around with conditions and commitments of a highly idealistic kind has perhaps departed from the spirit of the Old Testament at its best. There are possibilities for recognising an extension of what marriage means to a wider range of interpersonal relationships than traditional Christianity has heretofore allowed.

Lastly, it is clear that the Old Testament is relaxed about divorce – though admittedly within its own terms of a strictly male prerogative. I have argued (in 1.9, above) for that easiness to be responsibly recognised for all parties within the church's contemporary thinking: something which has the potential to remove much pain and unnecessary guilt from genuine souls.

F Theological conclusions

1 'MALE AND FEMALE CREATED'

The Genesis creation accounts, which we examined briefly in §B.1, are emphatic that the primeval couple are one. Any future coupling (including marriage) both mimics that origin and is in some sense driven by it. However, it is significant

that no specific reference to marriage as an institution is indicated, nor can it be concluded that this bond is unique or indissoluble; in other words, there is a prima facie case that the coming together of human beings in an intimate relationship is of its very nature part of the divine intention in creation. To restrict that to later legal definitions of marriage is not appropriate; equally, to ignore its implications for a biblical understanding of relationship is dangerous.

We are so accustomed to the only half-joking language of men and women as 'different species' – reinforced by the kind of cod psychology found in publications such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*⁴¹ – that it comes as a surprise that the Bible, at least in its origin stories, prefers to bind them closely together. Obviously the theological implications of the two together being as one a representation of the divine are far-reaching for Christian and Jewish anthropology; at the very least there is a clear call to these faiths to rethink radically the way they understand the roles of partners within a marriage, whether civil or religious, straight or gay.

This raises at once a problem where the two humans in a relationship are of the same gender, since Genesis 1-3 seems explicit in its categorising of male and female. I have no immediate answer to this: my social and cultural instincts are to go down the road of 'complementary pairs' in a more extended sense, bearing in mind that male-to-male bonding uses the same language as male-to-female and human-to-divine. Queer theory no doubt has light to shed on this conundrum⁴², together with recent thinking on the nature of gender as a spectrum rather than a sharp polarity.

2 MARRIAGE AND COVENANT

There is some evidence that marriage might have been seen as a covenant (*berit*) in ancient Israel. However there are a couple of caveats which need to be entered before this can be accepted as anything like the norm. First of all, the theological idea of the covenant is a powerful dimension of the Deuteronomistic theology of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It has its cultural roots in the process by which agreements of a political nature were forged between individuals or states, and may have been accompanied by ceremonial involving the ritual 'division' of a sacrifice (thus Genesis 15, in particular vv.9-11 and 17-18, and Exodus 24.5-8). Nothing of the kind is associated with marriage, where the closest parallel might be in the effective dynastic agreement forged between the fathers of the couple. Secondly, reference to covenant in association with marriage is found only within contexts where marriage, or its breakdown, serve

⁴¹ John Gray, HarperCollins, 1992.

⁴² For example Margaret Moers Wenig on Genesis 1 in *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Gregg Drinkwater, Joshua Lesser and David Shneer (New York University Press, 2009); review at <http://www.thereportergroup.org/Article.aspx?aID=1253>. Also John Linscheid, <http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~linsch/QGenesis.htm>

as metaphors for Yahweh's relationship with Judah and Israel (thus Hosea 2.18; Malachi 2.10, 14; Proverbs 2.17).

Theologically speaking, however, there is more to be said. The fact that the betrayal of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is likened to the ending of a marriage is significant – not because marriage depended on a covenant, but because the intensity of the divine-human bond can only adequately be described using terms associated with the closest forms of human-to-human relationships. Part of that metaphor is undoubtedly the pain arising from the breaking of such bonds and the inevitable sense of betrayal involved – hence the use of expressions such as 'false' and 'faithless' in the striking oracles in Jeremiah 3 and Malachi 2, and the note of pathos involved in the betrayal of youthful loyalties which is found in both of these passages as well as in Proverbs 2.16-19, and in Hosea 2.15-20. The latter offers a restoration – a new covenant with nature (v.18) and a marriage between Yahweh and Israel founded in a regular litany of key theological terms (vv.19-20): *tsedeq* ('righteousness'), *mishpat* ('justice'), *chesed* ('loyalty'), *rachamim* ('mercy') and *'emunah* ('trust'). The verb used here, three times, is *'aras*, which we have seen stands for male desire for a woman, and Israel's response is to 'know' (*yada*^c) Yahweh – presumably in the Biblical sense. This is a powerful theological statement, showing just how far the metaphor of marriage can be extended.

One other intriguing passage deserves a mention here. The one place where covenant and love are brought together in the forging of an emotional bond between two human beings is 1 Samuel 18.1-3:

When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. Saul took him that day and would not let him return to his father's house. Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul.

The language of the second sentence is particularly poignant: it is precisely the language of a man 'taking' a wife away from her father's house. It is, in truth, as though Jonathan were entering upon a form of marriage with David. Whatever this says to us about the propriety of gay marriage, it certainly offers us the one clear context in which the covenant is a human emotional bond.

3 LOYALTY AND TRUST

The concept of 'faithfulness' as an important aspect of any committed relationship between two people is so familiar to us that it comes as something of a shock to discover that it has almost no part to play in the treatment of marriage or relationships in the Hebrew Bible. The root *'aman* has two principal derivatives, *'emet* ('truth') and *'emunah* ('trustworthiness', 'faithfulness'), and has become part of Christian language from its use in the form 'amen' as an affirmation at the end of prayers and in other liturgical contexts. There are four passages

which bear on our theme, and which merit some further discussion. None of them deals with anything that could be considered as 'normal' marriage, the human action involved is relentlessly negative. They are Deuteronomy 7.7-13; Isaiah 1.21-26; Hosea 2.16-20; and Micah 7.5-7. Of these, only Deuteronomy and Isaiah include 'love' (*'ahav*). By contrast, there are many passages which use the Hebrew terms for faith, belief and trust: they are clearly important concepts for the Old Testament, if not directly for our theme⁴³.

A second term, God's *chesed* (loyalty) in relation to David, Israel, or his people generally is also on a number of occasions linked with faithfulness: of the passages listed, it occurs in Deuteronomy, Hosea and Micah. This word is very often translated 'loving-kindness' in English, though it is not clear how this interpretation is reached; I have more or less consistently used the meaning 'loyalty'. In later Hebrew it is found in the form *Chasidim*, meaning 'those who are zealous'; i.e., those whose loyalty is arguably excessive. *Chesed*, then, serves as a natural partner for trust.

We can now turn to Deuteronomy 7.7-13 armed with evidence which will help us to examine its importance in the wider discussion of covenant, love, and the way that divine relationships are expressed in and evoked by human. This is, of course, the passage where Yahweh makes it clear that God's choice of Israel had nothing to do with merit. It reads:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that I am commanding you today.

If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the LORD your God will maintain with you the covenant loyalty that he swore to your ancestors; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you.

The underlined terms indicate the use, variously, of four key expressions: *'ahav* ('love'); *ne'eman* ('faithful', from the root *'aman*); *berit* ('covenant'); and *chesed*

⁴³ Perhaps the most important is Genesis 15.6 where Abram is said to have 'believed (*'aman*) in the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness'. This affirmation is set in the context of the dramatic sealing of the covenant for the first time between Yahweh and Abram.

('loyalty'). They combine to demonstrate the divine-human equivalent of the bond between Jonathan and David: God is so much *in love* that the only way forward is to form a trustworthy, binding covenant of loyalty with the people. A marriage, in short – but one doomed, as we have already seen, to end in tears.

And here we have perhaps the most interesting outworking of the theology of marriage. It seems that God expected it to last for ever, and was hurt beyond measure by the breakdown of the 'special relationship' with Israel: hence the intensity of the recriminations that we have seen in Jeremiah and Malachi. But these are disproportionate, replete with the kind of hurtful language we are apt to use when our self-esteem is damaged – the verbal equivalent of shredding the departed lover's wardrobe! Ironically, the Old Testament in its provision for divorce hints at an alternative. Just as human romance can fade, so the naive covenant with a God who offers prosperity in return for obedience (and that is surely the burden of Deuteronomy) needs to be revisited, replaced with something healthier. This indeed might be the implication of Jeremiah 31.31-34, where the famous 'new covenant' is announced. The messy divorce between God and Israel was necessary to allow the emergence of a more mature relationship.

Dare we suggest, then, that the Christian doctrines of marriage should contain within them a means of healthy withdrawal, of enabling those involved to go forward without unnecessary bitterness and recrimination? This may be one important way in which the rootedness of the Old Testament in the everyday could point towards a new theology of relationships in which growth and change can be accommodated.

4 MOTHERS AND FATHERS

Marriage implies (more often than not) mothers and fathers, and there are some instructive passages on God's adoption of both of these roles in the Old Testament. They are to some extent stereotyped – as a father, God appears more often than not in a disciplinary mode, while it is as a mother that God embodies compassion. Perhaps this division is inevitable given the culture within which these texts were formed, but the fact that they are both present is important.

The starting point might as well be Deuteronomy 8.5-6:

Know then in your heart that as a parent [Hebrew: man] disciplines a child [Hebrew: his son] so the LORD your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

The rather uncompromising form of this declaration is qualified in an equally well-known text, Proverbs 3.11-12:

My child, do not despise the LORD's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,

for the LORD reproveth the one he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.

Similar ideas are represented in Job 5.17 and Psalm 94.12. On a broader canvass the whole of Proverbs 1 – 9 is in the mode of a father's (and sometimes a mother's) instruction of sons (daughters are not mentioned) in the way of wisdom. Allowing for the outdated gender conventions, we find in these citations an admirable portrayal of God as the ideal father, loving but firm, committed to the intellectual and ethical nurture of his children.

Instances of God as mother are more emotionally charged – though we might start by noting the other side of the metaphor implied in Genesis 1.27: if we, as male and female, are in the image of God, it follows that God is in some sense both male and female. The classic example must be Hosea 11.1-4, 8 in which God is presented as a mother who has cared tenderly for her children, and whose pain at their subsequent failure is touchingly described, together with her instinct to keep faith with them whatever happens.

Two verses in Deuteronomy (32.11, 18) seem to imply female characteristics: the eagle hovering over its nest to protect its young (though there is no reason why a father should not be thus described) and a reference to 'God who gave birth to you'. The birth and nursing metaphor is found also in Isaiah 42.14; 49.15; 66.13; and Psalm 131.2. Some of these are admittedly indirect – a matter of likening God *to* a woman in such circumstances; nevertheless the fact of employing such a comparison encourages us to think more broadly about the way we conceive of God. Far from a strict and grim disciplinarian, there is good evidence for a loving, compassionate, emotionally involved and deeply caring deity in the pages of the Old Testament⁴⁴.

5 FEAST AND FAMINE

Starting from the injunction to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1, there is in the Old Testament a close relationship between sexuality and fertility. Such connections are for obvious reasons commonplace in the world's religions: they are found in Egypt, Canaan, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, and make a lot of sense in pre-scientific societies. That the link is also present in the Old Testament is perhaps more surprising, not least when we recall the vitriolic attack on Canaanite religion in its pages.

I cannot explore this topic in any detail, but a few remarks relating to the passages we have already considered are in order. In Deuteronomy 7, immediately after God's declaration of love for Israel, we find in vv.12-14 a lush description of the fruitfulness attendant upon that love:

⁴⁴ One of the saddest passages in the Old Testament is Micah 7.5-7 which describes the breakdown of all human friendships and family ties, leaving the prophet with no-one to turn to but God. It may be some consolation that Yahweh can be thought of as equally a companion, a father and a mother.

If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the LORD your God will maintain with you the covenant loyalty that he swore to your ancestors; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you. You shall be the most blessed of peoples, with neither sterility nor barrenness among you or your livestock.

I have underlined two features: the familiar terms 'covenant loyalty' and 'love' from our earlier discussion, and terms reminiscent of the Genesis creation accounts – 'bless', 'multiply', 'fruit', and 'ground'. It might be interesting to associate with this the well-known Psalm 8, which reflects another aspect of Genesis 1 (dominion over the earth), and which famously describes humankind as almost god-like. There is the making here of an ecotheology rooted in relationships, but with a health warning: when relationships go wrong the whole earth suffers. Hence the lament for the failure of the rain in Jeremiah 3.2-3, and the link between divorce and the ruination of the land in Isaiah 50.1-3. Hosea 2 illustrates both sides of the equation: the loss of fertility in 2.3, 8-9, 12 and the promise of its recovery when Israel's relationship with Yahweh is restored (2.18: the covenant with nature; and 2.21-23: the return of grain, wine and oil to the land). It would be naive in the light of modern science to propose a causal link between human relationships and ecology; but there is something in the idea that healthy relationships include accountability in our working out of the responsibility for the created order given to humankind in Genesis.

6 FINAL NOTE: A KIND OF TRANSCENDENCE

Throughout this study I have emphasised that, with the possible 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 even the use of *racham* crosses the boundary in 1 Kings 3.26 and Gen 43.30. When it comes to the language of love we have shown beyond any shadow of a doubt that the same expression covers (as in English) the whole semantic field. Lust and love, passion and commitment, the sheer pleasure of relationships, desires both utterly mundane and sublimely transcendent, are given expression in the same way and 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 knows in heaven. I make no apology for the seemingly crass anthropomorphism of this claim: the love of one human being for another, 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. And 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.

Alastair G Hunter

2nd May 2011

11th July 2011

14th October 2011

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

Sexual love for wife	Genesis 24.67
Wife for Husband	1 Samuel 18.20
Father for son	Genesis 22.2
Mother for son	Genesis 25.28
Daughter-in-law for mother-in-law	Ruth 4.15
Slave for master	Exodus 21.5
Of friend	Proverbs 17.17
Neighbour/stranger	Leviticus 19.18, 34
Saul for David	1 Samuel 16.21
Jonathan for David	1 Samuel 18.1
People for David	1 Samuel 18.16
Erotic love	Song of Songs 1.3
Of many women	1 Kings 11.1
Woman for lover	Hosea 3.1
Incest	2 Samuel 13.1
Of God	Deuteronomy 6.5
Of wisdom	Proverbs 4.6

(b) God's Love

Of ancestors	Deuteronomy 4.37
His people	Deuteronomy 7.13
Israel	Isaiah 43.4
Of Solomon	2 Samuel 12.24
Of justice	Isaiah 61.8
For the righteous	Psalms 146.8
Of Mount Zion	Psalms 78.68
Of the sanctuary	Malachi 2.11
Wisdom's love	Proverbs 8.17

(c) Impersonal

Of the sanctuary	Psalm 26.8
Of righteousness	Psalm 45.7
Of commandments	Psalm 119.47
Of God's promise	Psalm 119.140
Of good	Amos 5.15
Of truth & peace	Zechariah 8.19
Of law	Psalm 119.97
Of discipline	Proverbs 12.1
For food	Genesis 27.4
Of sleep	Isaiah 56.10
Of long life	Psalm 34.12
Of evil	Micah 3.2
Of sin and strife	Proverbs 17.19
Of stupidity	Proverbs 1.22
Of cursing	Psalm 109.17
Of money	Qoheleth 5.10
For bribes	Isaiah 1.23
Of pleasure	Proverbs 21.17
Lust and prostitution	Isaiah 57.8
Prostitute's pay	Hosea 9.1
Of death	Proverbs 8.36
A time to love	Qoheleth 3.8

2 The abstract noun 'love' ('ahavah)

(a) Human

God	Deuteronomy 10.12
Love in society	Proverbs 10.12, 15.17
Wife / husband	Proverbs 5.19
Mother / child	Hosea 11.4
Jacob / Rachel	Genesis 29.20
Jonathan / David	1 Samuel 18.3
David / Jonathan	2 Samuel 1.26
Erotic	Song of Songs 2.4
Misplaced love	2 Samuel 19.6
Amnon / Tamar	2 Samuel 13.15
Solomon / foreign women	1 Kings 11.2

(b) God's love

Israel	Deuteronomy 7.8
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(c) Impersonal

Kindness

Micah 6.8

Bribes

Jeremiah 2.2

Lust

Jeremiah 2.33

APPENDIX 2: Glossary

'achot sister; lover, wife
'adam mankind, man
°adan to luxuriate
'ahav to love
'ahavah love
'alluph companion
'aman to trust, believe in
'emet truth
'emunah trustworthiness
ne'eman trustworthy
'aras to desire; be betrothed
ba' to come, enter into
ba°al (n) master, husband
(vb) marry, be lord of;
bagad to betray
bagodah false
berit covenant
cham father-in-law
chamot mother-in-law
chathan (vb) make a marriage
(n) groom, son-in-law
chathunah betrothal
chothen father-in-law
chaver (m) companion
chaverah (f) companion
chesed loyalty, 'loving kindness'
dad breast
dod beloved; love
'el God (in Canaan the
name of the chief god)
'elohim God (a plural form also
used to refer to 'gods')
°ervah nakedness
+ **davar** transgression
°ezer helper
ga'al to redeem
ge'ulah redemption

go'el redeemer
garash to drive out
gerushah divorcee – lit. one
driven out
get (post-Bib. Heb.) divorce
he°id to be a witness
'ish man, husband
'ishshah woman, wife
kallah bride, daughter-in-law
kelulot betrothal
kamar to become excited
laqach to take; to marry
mahar to pay a dowry
mohar dowry
meshuvah see shuv
mishpat justice
na'aph to commit adultery
nasa' to lift up; to marry
nechumah comfort
ne'eman see 'aman
ne°urim (abstract noun) youth
neqebah female
pilegesh concubine
racham to be compassionate
rachamim compassion
rachum compassionate
rechem womb
rea° neighbour, friend,
companion
regel foot; also euphemism
for genitalia
sachaq to laugh
sepher written document
+ **kerithut** bill of divorce
shakav to lie with, to sleep with

<i>shalach</i>	to let go, to divorce		
<i>shallach</i>	divorce (?)		
<i>shem</i>	name	yada^c	to know; to have sexual relations with
<i>shuv</i>	to turn, return	<i>yavam</i>	(vb) to act as brother-in-law
<i>meshuvah</i>	faithless		(n) brother-in-law
<i>shovav</i>	apostate	<i>yevamah</i>	sister-in-law
<i>tsachaq</i>	to taunt, tease sexually	<i>zakar</i>	male
<i>tsechoq</i>	taunting	<i>zanah</i>	to prostitute oneself
<i>tsedeq</i>	righteousness		

APPENDIX 3 A Note on *tsachaq*

The verb *tsachaq*, often translated 'to laugh' with its associated noun, *tsechoq*, is something of a puzzle. I shall argue here that this is a misunderstanding of a root which actually has its primary reference in the arena of some kind of sexual activity. This may seem strange, at first glance: the most important use of the word is in the legend of Sarah's barrenness, where the prophecy of a child late in her life prompts 'laughter' from both Sarah and Abraham (Genesis 17.17; 18.12, 13, 14). Moreover, there is a typical biblical etymology which suggests that the name Isaac (Hebrew *yitschaq*) is from the verb we are currently considering. It does seem a little strange to name a patriarch 'he who laughs'!

The confusion is made worse by the existence of a very similar root – *sachaq* – which can also mean 'to laugh'. One possibility is that it is simply an alternative spelling of the same root. However in every one of its occurrences (fifty-one in all) its meaning is clearly 'to play', 'to rejoice', 'to laugh', 'to entertain' or 'to be a laughing-stock'. At no point is there anything remotely similar to the sexual innuendo is found (as we shall see) in *tsachaq*.

I will begin this brief encounter with two episodes in which the essential meaning of this root is clearly seen. The first is Genesis 26.8, where we read:

Abimelech ... saw him [Isaac (*yitschaq*)] fondling (*metsacheq*) his wife Rebekah.

That is, Isaac is up to whatever *tsachaq* means with his wife. This incident occurs in a story (one of three) in which a patriarch tries to pass off his wife as his sister. In this case Isaac's host Abimelech is not fooled; for he is in no doubt, when he observes this behaviour, that the couple are husband and wife. NRSV translates the verb (which is in the form of a participle) as 'fondling'; NIV has 'caressing'; and AV has 'sporting with'. There can be no doubt that what is going on is a public display of some kind of sexual foreplay. Perhaps the somewhat coy expression 'naughtiness' might capture the sense of it!

The second piece of evidence comes from the story cited in footnote 32, where Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph. Whatever she accuses him of in her use of the verb *tsachaq* (Genesis 39.14, 17), it is hardly a simple matter of insult

(NRSV) or mockery (AV). Interestingly, NIV uses the AV's expression from 26.8, 'to make sport of' – and this might be closer to the truth. For surely what she is doing here is making a charge against Joseph of sexual harassment, to cover the reality of her own harassment of Joseph. The verb here is therefore plausibly to be taken as an expression of (unwanted) sexual activity.

Thirdly, the verb and its related noun are found in two contexts where sexual behaviour is associated with the worship of false gods. The first of these, Exodus 32.6, describes the events on the first occasion of worship of the golden calf cast by Aaron at the Israelites' request. They make various sacrifices, feast, and then *tsachaq* – and given the biblical rhetoric of what people do with false gods, it makes perfect sense to continue the sexual reference of the verb here.

Secondly, in Ezekiel 23.32, in the course of the prophet's diatribe about the obscene sexual activity of Oholah and Oholibah, he speaks of the final humiliation of the latter (that is, of Jerusalem). She shall be, he declares, an object of sex (*tsachaq*) and of mockery.

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence comes from a very familiar episode in Judges – the death of Samson. The root is found at the point where Samson, blinded and shorn of his power, is paraded to 'entertain' the Philistines (Judges 16.25-27).

And when their hearts were merry, they said, 'Call Samson, and let him entertain (*sachaq*) us.' So they called Samson out of the prison, and he performed (*tsachaq*) for them. They made him stand between the pillars; and Samson said to the attendant who held him by the hand, 'Let me feel the pillars on which the house rests, so that I may lean against them.' Now the house was full of men and women; all the lords of the Philistines were there, and on the roof there were about three thousand men and women, who looked on while Samson performed (literally, 'at the *sechoq* of Samson').

The verb used for 'entertain' is the very similar *sachaq* whose meaning I noted above. I believe that the writer of this story has quite deliberately used the two verbs together to make a punning point (this is, by the way, the only place where the two verbs are used together). The Philistines expect Samson to be a laughing-stock, the butt of their mockery. But he responds instead using the word *tsachaq* – in other words, by making an obscene sexual gesture towards the watching crowds⁴⁵. The irony is reinforced by the elaborate description in v.27 of the watching crowd eager to see the 'spectacle' (*sechoq*) of Samson, in sublime ignorance of the fate that awaits them when he tears down the pillars of the house in violent revenge.

One last curiosity, before we turn to Isaac. In the course of the legend of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, there is a verse which takes on a new meaning in the light of the foregoing analysis. It is Genesis 19.14:

⁴⁵ The fact that Samson was betrayed by his own sexual obsession with the femme fatale, Delilah, adds further piquancy to this reading.

So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, 'Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the city.' But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting (*metsacheq*).

The idea that Lot's future sons-in-law would think he was jesting at this point in the story is strange. It makes much more sense, given that the family were besieged at the time by the young men of Sodom demanding sexual favours, if Lot's sons-in-law are suspicious that Lot was planning to throw them to the wolves, to get them out of the house to placate the locals: the phrase would then read something like 'It seemed to his sons-in-law that he was making sexual objects of them'.

This brings us, at length, to those passages where *tsachaq* is used in association with the birth and naming of Isaac, and its aftermath: Genesis 17.17; 18.12, 13, 15; 21.6, 9. As we have already seen, the root seems to have as its core meaning some kind of sexual behaviour. This is not morally coded: depending on the circumstances it can be positive or negative. If I have correctly interpreted this root, what are we to make of its function in the Isaac traditions? The relevant passages are:

1 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' (17.17)

2 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.' (18.11-15)

3 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.' (21.5-6)

4 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing [with her son Isaac⁴⁶]. So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' (21.8-10)

The first two represent first Abraham and then Sarah 'laughing' at the news that someone as old as she might become pregnant. Sarah's 'laughter' is paired with a root, *ʿadan* which, apart from being the source of the name 'Eden' of the

⁴⁶ The phrase 'with her son Isaac' is not in the Hebrew. It has been added on the basis of the Greek and Latin translations.

luxuriant garden in Genesis 2, has the basic meaning of 'luxury' or 'indulgence'. Coupled with the likely implied etymology of Isaac's name (see in particular 17.17-19), there is much to be said for seeing some kind of fertility aspect to the whole sequence. A barren woman of ninety, an old man of one hundred, and Isaac, the living proof of Yahweh's ability to re-awaken the sexual potency of God's chosen vehicles: this demands something more than laughter. I have been so far unable to come up with a single appropriate English equivalent. Perhaps 'snigger' or 'leer' are part of it; perhaps a gesture is involved. At any rate, it is likely that Abraham and Sarah's dismissal of the prediction was at the bawdy end of the laughter spectrum. The reversal, when a son is against the odds born to be their heir, is to use that same verb in a positive sense – indicating the force of sexuality – by using it for his name, Isaac (Yitschaq).

Finally, what was Ishmael up to in 21.9? Given what we have already ascertained, this is now remarkably simple to explain. First of all, from the chronology earlier in Genesis, it is clear that Ishmael was, by the time Isaac was weaned, a teenager. He is Abraham's first son, and as such poses a threat to the priority of Sarah and her son. Sarah sees Ishmael *metsacheq*. There is no reference to Isaac: Ishmael is engaged on private business, and it is almost certain that in fact Sarah caught him (to use a euphemism) engaged in auto-eroticism. This brought home to her the serious threat that a potent male heir, already of age, presented to herself and Isaac; hence her immediate reaction, to demand that Abraham get rid of the pair of them.

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