

Marital Imagery in the Bible: A Summary

It can only be imagined that the New Testament writers when they made their (albeit brief) comments on divorce and remarriage they assumed they would be understood. So what has gone wrong?

In the years after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., when Graeco-Roman culture and influence was at its height, the church lost the Jewish perspective of marriage and divorce, and thus the context of those brief New Testament comments was also lost. In those early centuries of the Christian era the church did its best to interpret their Scriptures in light of its own contemporary culture. An idealised concept of marriage based on the Garden of Eden story developed. Genesis 2:23 tells us that Adam said: 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man'—Eve was made for Adam, the marriage was based on mutual attraction, and that specific union was ordained by God. And so it was that Adam and Eve's marriage became the model for our own marriages.

But this study suggests that that was never the understanding of ancient Israel. Instead they looked to Genesis 2:24: 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'—so a naturally born man chooses a wife for himself, and their union is based on a 'covenant'—in other words an agreement. The Old Testament makes it clear what the basis of that agreement is. Furthermore, it is clear, if that agreement is broken, there can be a divorce and a remarriage. All the Bible's marital imagery (where the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures *imagine* that God is married to his people) is based on that understanding of human marriage. In more technical terms, the conceptual domain of marriage in ancient Israel was based on Genesis 2:24, and it is that conceptual domain that is employed in the Bible's marital imagery.

But the Christian church today still understands that human marriage is based on Genesis 2:23. Furthermore, so strong is that paradigm, that when Genesis 2:24 is referred to in the New Testament (four times—Genesis 2:23 is not referenced), it is thought that the reference is to Adam and Eve's marriage. It is a paradigmatic marriage that for many excludes (or greatly restricts) the possibility of divorce and remarriage.

This study looks to challenge that paradigm.