Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery (Isaiah 50:1-3 and 54:1-10, Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3)
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1 Goals of the study

In this study a selection of prophetic texts will be examined which present the covenant relationship as a marriage relationship. It is well-known that prophetic writings occasionally employ terms from the field of marriage in order to offer insight into the relation between Yhwh and Israel. This is done in a variety of ways, at times rather obviously and at times more subtly, at times in a context of confrontation and at times in a context of comfort.

The purpose of this study is to pursue the motif of marriage in Isaiah 50 and 54, Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3 and to investigate the variation within this imagery in these texts. Which accents are typical for the marriage imagery in these texts? Who is depicted as the partner of Yhwh? Is this Sion, the nation Israel or the land? Is there an emphasis on the estrangement of the two partners or rather on the renewal of the relationship? Is the accent on lovers other than Yhwh, or on the absence of other lovers? Is the marriage relation between Yhwh and Israel presented as a given fact or as a happening? Briefly put, what is the shape and particular significance of the marriage imagery in these texts?

The marriage imagery gains in significance because it sheds light on an essential point in the biblical texts: the character of Yhwh and his relationship to Israel. The paradigm of marriage depicts Yhwh in dynamic and intimate interaction with Israel, deeply involved and intensely committed to Israel. This picture may offer correction to other perceptions of the God of Israel which consider Yhwh to be static and distant, absent and inactive. In various ways the marriage imagery renders a strikingly different image of Yhwh than the ones just mentioned and it will be the aim of this study to delineate the characteristic elements of this imagery and to spell out its implications as these emerge from the texts.

The study will proceed in three stages. First, I will deal with three general issues that relate to the biblical marriage metaphor. These are the definition of metaphor, the background of the notion of a married deity in the cultures surrounding Israel and the hermeneutical suspicion of feminist scholars with respect to the marriage metaphor. All of these issues have come to the fore in the history of interpretation and some of these dominate the exegetical discussion concerning biblical marriage imagery at present.

Second, I will offer a detailed analysis of the texts in which the marriage imagery occurs. The aim at this stage is to bring into focus the individual character of the texts in the books of Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah. What is the composition of a text, what is its main thrust? In which particular sense does it attempt to speak to its audience? Only after considering such questions will it be possible to deal with the function of the marriage imagery within these texts. In
terms of method, I depart from the predominantly form-critical and redaction-critical approaches to prophetic literature. I will develop a model of interpretation that is synchronic and sensitive to features of composition and communication, the latter on the assumption that prophetic texts are, after all, *speech*.

Third, I will bring together the results of the investigation thus far and explore the implications of the marriage imagery for biblical theology. Here some comments will be made about the claims and promises that the love of Yhwh for his people entails, about the mutuality in the partnership that the marriage imagery seems to imply and about a few other related issues. Notions such as the anthropomorphism of Yhwh and the character of God’s love for Israel will be illuminated anew through these reflections on the biblical marriage imagery.

The heart and most expansive part of this study lies in the investigation of Isaiah 50 and 54, Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3. The treatment of these texts goes far beyond an analysis of the marriage imagery and aims at a careful understanding of the specific character of these texts within their particular context. As a result, the present book may be read as well as a collection of fresh synchronic text studies, introducing the reader anew to the appeals and encouragement’s made in the vivid prophetic speech that is found in the books of Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah.

### 2 Scope of the study

At this point, it is necessary to develop a working definition of marriage imagery and to indicate the scope of the present research. Marriage imagery may be defined as the portrayal of Yhwh and Israel as marriage partners, which includes the personification of Yhwh as the husband and of Israel or Zion or the like as his female partner.

The element of personification is important, since the female personification of the nation or city is a poetic phenomenon that occurs within the Hebrew Bible only in the prophetic and poetic corpus. In effect, this definition of marriage imagery limits the scope of the present study to the prophetic corpus. The Song of Songs contains love language but does not clearly identify the characters involved as Yhwh and Israel, while Lamentations does not even hint at portraying Yhwh as the husband of Jerusalem, although it does personify Jerusalem as a female.

Personification is of course not the only characteristic of marriage imagery, the presence of terms from the semantic field of marriage is also required. It is possible to distinguish between two clusters of terms that point to marriage imagery: those that are directly and explicitly related to the notion of marriage and those, which are only indirectly related to that notion. Within the first cluster one can distinguish terms that point to marriage in a positive sense and in a negative sense. The first category consists of terms such as אֲוָּדָה (love) and אָוָּדָה (to love), בָּשָׂל (to marry), אֶרֶשׁ (to become engaged, to take as bride), לֶל (bride) and מֶלֶט (bridal time) and related terms. The second category of terms within this cluster point to marriage in a negative sense, and includes such terms as נֵעֶר (to commit harlotry), נֻפָּא (to commit adultery), נֵשְׁנִי (to be unfaithful), פֶּרֶס (letter of divorce) and the like. The second cluster of terms is more
neutral but, dependent on the context, terms of this cluster may also occur in connection to marriage imagery. This holds true for terms such as ש'א (man, husband), נ'א (woman, wife), ח'ל (to send away) and נ'ב (covenant). Appendix 1 shows a survey of the distribution of these terms in Isaiah 50 and 54, Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3.

It is important to note that the term ‘marriage imagery’ is in fact an umbrella for various sub-forms of metaphorical speech. Such different notions as divorce, adultery, promiscuity, love and a renewed commitment come to the fore within the framework of marriage imagery. The notion of marriage is thus a root metaphor that can be elaborated in various directions and result in several forms of metaphorical speech. At the same time it is not always easy to draw a distinction between marriage imagery and related forms of speech. A number of expressions seem to be related to marriage imagery and yet must be distinguished from it. Three points may be mentioned.

First, the expression נ' ג (cf. Ex. 20:5; 34:14) is sometimes associated with the notion of marriage, since the same root occurs in a marital context in Numbers 5:14, 30, indicating the jealousy of a husband who suspects his wife of unfaithfulness. But the root נ' ג has a broad range of meanings. The term points to a strong emotion – rage, envy or another form of intense involvement. When the expression נ' ג occurs, it is usually translated as ‘jealous’. In the context references are often found to ‘other gods’ which Israel must not bow down to, since Yhwh is a ‘jealous god’ (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 4:24; 6:15). One would be tempted to translate נ' ג here as ‘demanding exclusive fidelity’. The notion of an exclusive relation between Yhwh and Israel is present in the word, as well as the notion of a strong emotion, but the notion of marriage is not explicitly present. The demand for exclusive worship of Yhwh may be explained as a standard element within covenant idiom.

The second term which deserves comment is the verb ג (to love). It is obvious that not all occurrences of this verb in the context of Yhwh and Israel are indicative of marital imagery. The verb may indicate the parental love of Yhwh for Israel (Hos. 11:1), the covenantal love of Yhwh for Israel and vice versa (Deut. 4:37; 6:5; 7:13; 11:1) or the love of the individual in his prayer to Yhwh (Ps. 116:1). In none of these cases is it appropriate to speak of marriage imagery. In the case of the mentioned Deuteronomy texts, one may come closest to the prophetic marriage imagery but neither the notion of marriage nor the personification of Israel as the female partner of Yhwh is explicitly present. Another aspect is that not all expressions for love with respect to Yhwh and Israel are connected to the term ג. The notion of love also comes to the fore in texts which employ elements from the vocabulary of love songs. As examples one

1. BDB, p. 888, circumscribes the meaning of the noun נ'ג as ‘ardour, zeal, jealousy (from colour produced in face by deep emotion)’.

2. The obligation of exclusive loyalty and obedience is a part of political treaties and is also a part of the covenant between Yhwh and Israel. Israel has the covenantal obligation to worship Yhwh exclusively. Cf. J. Galambush, Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh’s Wife (SBLDS 130), Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992, p. 32.
could mention Isaiah 5:1-7 and the Song of Songs.\(^3\) These texts contain vocabulary that belongs to the sphere of love lyrics, but neither text speaks about Israel as the beloved of Yhwh within the framework of marriage. It may thus be concluded that the issue of love imagery and love language is more diverse and comprehensive than the limited topic of marriage imagery.

The third term that is relevant here is the term הָּרִ֑ו ל (to commit harlotry). This verb is a key term in the field of the marriage metaphor and dominates a great deal of the texts that will be discussed, although it points to the converse of an intact marriage relation. The verb and its related nominal forms have a complex distribution pattern. Although forms of this root occur in connection to marriage imagery in prophetic texts, such as Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3, they also occur in prophetic texts without the assumption of marriage and, to complicate the matter, they also occur in the context of the relation between Yhwh and Israel outside the prophetic texts. The question is whether it is justified to assume the notion of marriage to be present in all of these cases.

In Isaiah 23:17-18 and Nahum 3:4 the term הָּרִ֑ו ל occurs in relation to foreign cities that are personified as a female. These cities, Tyre and Nineveh, are depicted as being involved in prostitution. One may understand the term הָּרִ֑ו ל here as a strongly pejorative term for 'having promiscuous contacts' in the sphere of the trade. It seems right to conclude that although both the female personification of a city and the term הָּרִ֑ו ל occur in these texts, elements which otherwise could point to marriage imagery, the phenomenon as such is absent here. Thus while the root הָּרִ֑ו ל may occur in the context of marriage imagery, it does not always imply the notion of a marriage relationship. The same holds mutatis mutandis for texts such as Exodus 34:14-16 and Deuteronomy 31:16-17. In these texts the term הָּרִ֑ו ל occurs as a metaphor for the worship of gods other than Yhwh and the implied meaning is that such acts violate the exclusive covenant relationship with Yhwh. The notion of exclusivity is present in this usage but the emphasis in the expression lies on the scandalous dimensions of Israel's covenant disloyalty, while the notion of marriage and the female personification of the nation are lacking. In that sense, the conclusion of Galambush may be quoted assentingly. In her view, the use of the verb הָּרִ֑ו ל as a metaphor for apostasy is so significantly different in the prophetic and extra-prophetic literature, that it is fair to speak of 'distinct, though related, metaphors'.\(^4\)

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4. Cf. Galambush, Jerusalem, pp. 37-38. The element of personification in the prophetic texts is the most obvious of these differences. In connection to Hosea 1.2 I will offer a more detailed study of the verb הָּרִ֑ו ל (see chapter 4).
INTRODUCTION

3 The selection of texts

This study focuses on the following texts: Isaiah 50:1-3 and 54:1-10, Hosea 1-3 and Jer 2:1-4:4. This combination of texts offers the opportunity to investigate various forms of marriage imagery. Isaiah 50 and 54 focus on Zion as the partner of Yhwh. Hosea 1-3 concentrates on the land or the nation Israel as the partner of Yhwh. Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 focuses on the nation as well and presents Yhwh with two female partners, Judah and Israel (3:6-10).

Not only the identity of the partners, but also the setting in which the imagery occurs is distinct. In Second Isaiah the marriage imagery functions in the context of comfort. In Hosea 1-3, the most classical text with marriage imagery, the context is one of confrontation caused by the diagnosis that Israel commits harlotry and is disloyal to Yhwh. In Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 the situation is similar to that in Hosea 1-3, as the harlotry and apostasy of Israel are again central issues, but the Jeremiah text differs from the latter by opening with an unequivocally positive and harmonious picture of the relationship between Yhwh and Israel as a sort of motto (Jer. 2:2-3). Through these distinctive elements and accents, the combination of texts from the books Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah can provide us with a reasonable overview of marriage imagery in the Hebrew Bible.

At the same time, this selection of texts is not exhaustive. Texts such as Ezekiel 16 and 23 present similar forms of metaphorical speech as the selected texts and should be included in a complete survey of marriage imagery. The same holds for Isaiah 62 and in a more remote sense for Jeremiah 31:1-6. Since, however, it is an important assumption of this study that texts cannot simply be removed from their literary context in order to study the treatment of one particular theme, space does not permit the treatment of Ezekiel 16 and 23 and other texts. Another more substantial argument for the omission of Ezekiel 16 and 23 is that these texts are of a length and a literary sophistication that is characteristic of the book of Ezekiel and are of a different nature than Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-4:4. The Ezekiel texts are long and coherent literary pieces which deal with the topic of the unfaithful wife with great consistency and in great detail. The metaphors of prostitution and adultery are elaborated with great intensity and in many directions and dominate almost exclusively in these texts. On the whole, the character of Ezekiel 16 and 23 differs sufficiently from Hosea, Jeremiah and Second Isaiah to justify the concentration on the latter texts in this study and to leave the former aside.

Galambush (Jerusalem, pp. 78-81) argues that both Hosea and Jeremiah employ the marriage metaphor in a more ‘impressionistic’ fashion than Ezekiel. She discerns a number of differences in style (‘length, coherence and degree of detail’) and in content. Galambush writes (p. 79): ‘More important, however, than sheer length, is the conceptual coherence of Ezekiel’s metaphor. In Jeremiah the marriage metaphor is interspersed with address to and about (male) Israel and Judah, and consequently cannot be read as a unity. In Hosea the metaphor seems to govern all of chaps 1-3 (39 verses), but the constant changes in the metaphor’s tenor make for a more impressionistic than coherent depiction of Yahweh’s unfaithful wife. Ezekiel, by contrast, devotes two lengthy chapters exclusively to telling “Jerusalem her abominations” (16:2).’ Galambush further points out that Ezekiel is unique in (a) exploiting the woman’s biography as a vehicle for depicting the nation’s history, (b) employing the metaphor to refer to specific political events. Her conclusion is that Ezekiel moves
'the marriage metaphor from its ancillary role in Hosea and Jeremiah into the literal and conceptual centre of his own prophecy' (pp. 80-81).

The outline above may seem to some scholars to be debatable. In the first place the issue may be raised whether it makes sense to study texts from quite diverse literary settings in relation to one another. In the second place the isolation of a theme from a text may be challenged because it contrasts with the tendency to let the world of a text intact and let the text speak for itself. 'All we have is the texts and nothing more,' may be a suitable paraphrase of the methodological stance of much intratextual research. In this perspective thematic research is past tense. Both of these issues point to the relation of text and theme. In response to the first issue, I can only say that I am aware of the dangers of decontextualization and superficiality in matters of text interpretation and hope to avoid them. In response to the second issue, I would like to point out that the books of Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah, despite all of their differences, have themes and characters in common. One of these is the metaphorical presentation of Yhwh and Israel as marriage partners. The benefit of bringing these texts together is that a recurrent theme as this does not remain 'hidden' in several separate studies but can be explicitly studied with a view to its characteristic elements and implications.

Appendix 1

Marriage Terms in Isaiah 50:1-3; 54:1-10, Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2:1-4:4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Isaiah 50:1-3, 54:1-10</th>
<th>Hosea 1-3</th>
<th>Jeremiah 2:1-4:4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(love)</td>
<td>3:1, 1</td>
<td>2:25</td>
<td>2:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(lover)</td>
<td>3:1</td>
<td>2:25</td>
<td>2:25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(to marry)</td>
<td>54:1, 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(husband)</td>
<td>2:18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(to become engaged)</td>
<td>2:21, 22</td>
<td></td>
<td>2:32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(bride)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2:2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(bridegroom)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(to commit harlotry)</td>
<td>1:2; 2:7, 3:1; 2:33; 3:2, 6; 3:2, 9</td>
<td>2:20; 3:1, 6, 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(harlotry)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(to commit adultery)</td>
<td>3:1</td>
<td>3:8, 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(adultery)</td>
<td>2:4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(to be unfaithful)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3:8, 11, 20, 20</td>
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<tr>
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<td>50:1</td>
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<td>3:1</td>
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<tr>
<td>(letter of divorce)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3:8</td>
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<tr>
<td>(man, husband)</td>
<td>50:1</td>
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<td>3:1, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(woman, wife)</td>
<td>54:6, 6</td>
<td>2:4, 9, 12, 18</td>
<td>3:1, 3, 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>(covenant)</td>
<td>54:10</td>
<td>2:20</td>
<td>3:16</td>
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