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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Citation for published version (APA):
CHAPTER 7

Theological Implications of the Marriage Imagery

In conclusion to the text studies in this book I wish to return to the marriage imagery and try to unfold the implications of this imagery for the biblical perception of God. The leading question in this chapter is: how do the biblical texts portray the God of Israel through this imagery? What does this imagery articulate and emphasize in the character of Yahweh?

This issue moves from the level of text interpretation to the level of more comprehensive issues relating to biblical theology. Here several questions may be asked. Is it justified to probe a collection of texts with all their internal differences for such encompassing structural notions? Is it possible? Is it fruitful? The motivation for such an enterprise could lie in the notion that the claims made about God in the biblical texts are in need of further clarification. This is true in the first place in view of the biblical account itself, which offers us insight into the character of Yahweh only in fragments and images. It seems thus important to assemble the pieces in order to establish a fuller picture. In the second place, the contemporary situation also gives rise to the need for a fresh exposition of biblical themes. In biblical scholarship during the last decades, attention has grown for the pluralist voices in the text and for the less than self-evident character of biblical speech about God. Scepticism about the appropriateness of our categories for the understanding of biblical texts and their portrayal of Yahweh has replaced the unflinching certitude of preceding generations. In this light it is challenging to reinvestigate the portrayal of Yahweh in the texts and to discover whether some fresh knowledge about Yahweh will emerge from a recurrent metaphor such as the marriage metaphor.

I proceed from the provisional definition that biblical theology is the discipline that deals with structural and unifying elements in the biblical texts with respect to God and human life, in critical reflection of the categories and paradigms applied in the process of biblical interpretation. An important

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additional element in my understanding is the notion of abstraction. Some abstraction is necessary within the framework of biblical theology, not only in the sense that in the process of establishing major structural features in the Bible the details are left out but also in the sense that a critical re-evaluation of the time-bound elements in these texts is indispensable. The latter can be illustrated by the marriage imagery in which Yhwh is cast as the husband and Israel as the wife. It has been argued that these gender roles are conclusive for the understanding of the relationship between Yhwh and Israel, in the sense that in analogy to human marriage Yhwh is the dominant and Israel the submissive partner. The marriage imagery would thus pin Yhwh down to the role of a conservative husband and Israel to the role of a passive wife, with the danger that such a concept of marriage roles is supported as a divinely sanctioned model for modern times as well. Biblical theology is not, however, the literal perpetuation of biblical concepts, but requires a creative adaptation of the tradition. I would, therefore, seek the point of the marriage imagery in the notion of partnership, in relative abstraction of the gender roles. Israel and Yhwh are bound as partners in a covenant relation and the marriage imagery signifies that this is more than a formal affair: it is a passionate affair with a strong and affectionate involvement of the two partners.

After these preliminary reflections, some insight will be given into the history of reception regarding the topic of marriage imagery. That will be followed by some observations emerging from the present study. It may be emphasized that the ambition of this chapter is not to think through the implications of the biblical marriage imagery in a systematic way. I will highlight a few prominent aspects of this biblical imagery in terms that, on the one hand, remain close to the texts and, on the other hand, bring the implied contours of how Yhwh and Israel relate in these texts more sharply into focus.

2 Reception of the marriage imagery: some voices

It is impossible to offer a survey of all that has been written on the prophetic marriage imagery. In systematic treatments this imagery is usually listed under the more general theme of God’s love for Israel and humankind. On these topics many studies are available in the field of both exegetical and dogmatic studies.

I will highlight here three authors that have made a significant contribution to the reception of the biblical marriage imagery, from a philosophical, theological or literary point of view.


In his philosophy love is the utmost characterization of God revealing himself. The revelation, which denotes God in his bending towards humanity, can be equalled to nothing but love, as love is a movement towards someone else that is ever new and elusive and that is characterized by complete self-abandonment. This is the way that God loves man.\(^6\) God’s relation to man is thus comparable to that of a lover and his or her beloved. In fact, it is not only comparable to such a relation, it coincides with the dynamic and intimate relationship between a lover and his special and beloved partner. The love expressed in the Song of Songs, and everything that it includes in terms of joy, passion, pleasure and delight, illustrates how profoundly and creatively God loves the human soul, drawing it by his love into a lasting Ich-und-Du relationship. Rosenzweig makes occasional reference to the prophetic marriage imagery but primarily refers to the Song of Songs as the supreme model of God’s relationship to humanity. His reflections on the relationship between God and humanity as a relation between lover and beloved remain impressive.

Neher has written an article on the marriage imagery (1954) containing a mixture of literary observations and theological reflections.\(^7\) A central point in his view is that the metaphor of marriage is employed in the biblical texts in order to represent the history of the covenant. Every stage in Israel’s history corresponds to a stage in the marriage between Yhwh and Israel. The growing love during the time of youth, the engagement and bridal time in the wilderness and the married life in the land with its concomitant deceptions and nadirs, all fit within the scheme of the covenant history as the biography of a marriage.\(^8\) These observations correspond to the texts. In Jeremiah 2:2-7 and Hosea 2:4-7, 17, 21-22, indeed the depiction is that of an initially harmonious partnership and a subsequently broken relationship, due to the adultery of Israel with other gods (‘lovers’) in the land of Canaan. The prophetic message is that Israel is called in the present to a similar devotion to the covenant as in her youth.

Most significantly, according to Neher the marriage imagery expresses that the covenant is not a static relationship, in which the roles and patterns are fixed, but a dynamic event, in which the relationship between the two partners is constantly changing.\(^9\) The marriage imagery expresses that the covenant relationship involves a permanent dialectic of proximity and distance. It goes through several stages and has a dramatic character.

For Brueggemann (1997) the marital imagery points to the intensity of Yhwh’s commitment to Israel.\(^10\) In terminology similar to Heschel, Brueggeman takes ‘passion’ as a key word in his portrayal of Yhwh. Yhwh’s engagement to Israel is passionate and involves powerful feelings of concern, care and affection, feelings that surpass the scholastic attributes usually assigned to God (omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience). This passion for Israel also entails that

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Yhwh yearns for the return of the straying partner and continues to sustain a relationship 'that rightfully could be terminated'. The covenant and the state and fate of the covenant partner, Israel, are thus to Yhwh not a matter of indifference but of radical involvement and passion.

Characteristic of Brueggemann's treatment is that he points to a remaining tension in Yhwh between his relatedness and his sovereignty, between his passion and his freedom. The love and fidelity shown towards Israel are the love of a Partner that acts on his own terms and according to a free choice. Yhwh can withdraw from the relationship and retain his sovereignty. He may decide to love or to leave when Israel is wayward. If this dialectic were not there, the love of God would mean that the partner would be 'completely safe in the relationship'.

The remaining otherness of Yhwh, however, maintains a high level of tension in his love and commitment to Israel.

### 3 Love, a technical term?

The prophetic marriage imagery has points of overlap with the notion of God's love for Israel. In this respect it is appropriate to briefly discuss the thesis of Moran (1963) who has argued that the concept of love in Deuteronomy does not point to love as an emotion but to the required loyalty of a vassal to his sovereign and vice versa. This love may be further defined in terms of 'loyalty, service and obedience'. The verb בָּרוּך would thus be a technical term within treaty language.

Moran has limited his investigations to Deuteronomy and to the love towards God, and to that extent his reflections touch only indirectly upon the topic of marriage imagery. There is no hint in his article that references to the love of God for the people would also be explainable as technical treaty language. The impossibility of such a proposal becomes evident when from a survey of the biblical texts it appears that the motif of God's love for Israel often bears a connotation of election and special favour (Deut. 7:8; 10:15; Mal. 1:2). There is a sense of the preciousness of Israel in Yhwh's eyes (Isa. 43:3-4) and of the warm and unmerited commitment of Yhwh to Israel (Hos. 3:1; 14:4; 2 Chr. 9:8). If the words with which the term 'love' combines are taken into account, terms such as 'compassion' and 'loving kindness (Jer. 31:3) come to the fore and confirm that the love of God for Israel in these texts is not 'technical treaty language' but has strongly emotional overtones.

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4 Isaiah 50 and 54, Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2-3

My major conclusions with respect to the marriage imagery in the texts studied in this book may be recapitulated here.

In Isaiah 50 and 54 the emphasis lies on the revitalizing power of the love and care of Yhwh for Zion. The promise that Yhwh will remarry Zion (54:5) contributes to the comfort of Zion and is part of the reversal of her fortunes. The new alliance of Yhwh with the city is presented with such exalted tones of hope and happiness that it must have a reassuring effect on Zion. This new alliance will lead Zion to restoration and revival (54:1-6). The love of Yhwh thus revitalizes Zion and opens up a new future for the city.

In Hosea 1-3, the emphasis lies on the covenant as a relationship that requires mutual fidelity and commitment. The marriage relationship between Yhwh and Israel is portrayed here as a special and unique relationship in which there is no room for the interference of other lovers. When Israel, nonetheless, worships other gods and risks a divorce, Yhwh reacts with passion. This passionate reaction and the equally intense effort to restore the partnership with Israel and to usher in a new bridal time (2:21-22) suggest that Yhwh is devoted to Israel and does not want to give up his involvement with Israel.

In Jeremiah 2-3, the emphasis is again on the response of Israel and on its unfaithfulness. The present infidelity of Israel is contrasted with the harmony and reciprocity between Yhwh and Israel in the past. In a great teshuva speech Israel is called to a new intimacy with Yhwh and to new conjugal responsiveness, a perspective that is endowed with promises and blessings (3:14-18, 4:2). On the whole, the marriage imagery is rather freely employed in Jeremiah 2-3: Yhwh is married to two spouses at once and in a daring comparison with the situation of divorce and remarriage on the human level, the text makes it clear that, in disregard of this legislation, Yhwh will gladly take his unfaithful partner back. Again, the marriage imagery implies that the covenant is perceived of as an affectionate relationship that involves the fidelity and commitment of both partners. Above all, it demonstrates the desire of Yhwh to have Israel back and to bring her to the appropriate response, which is to live faithfully and fruitfully within the covenant as his treasured and beloved partner.

5 Prominent aspects of the marriage imagery

In conclusion I will highlight five prominent aspects of the biblical marriage imagery as they emerge from the texts studied in this book.

The God of Israel: engaged and engaging

The portrayal of Yhwh as the marriage partner of the people of Israel leaves no doubt that the biblical God is not a universal and abstract principle, but an engaged and engaging character.

His engagement takes the form of an intense and enduring relationship with Israel: the covenant. In the acts of this covenant Yhwh’s love for Israel becomes perceptible. He chooses Israel to become his, he liberates Israel from slavery in Egypt and guides and sustains the people on their way through the desert. These
acts illustrate the concern of Yhwh for Israel and give Israel the elementary sense of being loved. In the context of marriage imagery frequent references to the primary events in the covenant occur: the liberation from Egypt, the desert period and the alliance established there (Jer. 2:2; Hos. 2:16-17), as if to illustrate the strong connections between the notions of marriage and love and the major events within the covenant.

The covenant relationship also provides the love and commitment of Yhwh to Israel with a dimension of durability. Yhwh's love for the people is not a sudden burst of emotion or a temporary affair, but a reliable and lasting commitment. It is a commitment that extends back in time and that stretches out to the future. The notion of partnership, therefore, also provides prospects and expectations for the future. On the whole, the covenant setting of the notions of love and marriage indicates that the love and engagement of Yhwh to Israel should not be understood only as emotions but also as acts that confirm and fill out Yhwh's commitment to Israel.

**Anthropomorphism**

It is well-known that anthropomorphic descriptions of Yhwh abound in the Hebrew Scriptures: Yhwh has a face, mouth, eyes, heart, hands, ears, feet and a voice. He laughs, takes a walk, comes, sees, gets tired, sleeps. Such anthropomorphic characterizations go together with a lasting sense of the inaccessible glory and principal hiddenness of Yhwh.

The marriage imagery also contributes to this anthropomorphism. As marriage partner of the people Yhwh comes close to Israel. He makes her his spouse, lives with her in a lasting commitment, divorces her, takes her back, loves her. He affirms the partnership again and again and cannot bear the idea that she is turning to other 'lovers'. There seems to be no hindrance to depicting Yhwh in such intimacy to Israel. The marriage imagery in every respect pictures Yhwh in a very anthropomorphic way and as a human partner to a human people. According to this imagery, Yhwh's commitment and affection for Israel are as close around, as daily and as tangible as the love between marriage partners can be.

**The special character of God's love for Israel**

What is distinct in God's love for Israel? I see three key words: extensiveness in time, intimacy and pleasure. In the first place, the love of Yhwh as it is implicitly or explicitly present in Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3 and Isaiah 54, is part of a dynamic relationship with Israel. I stressed this covenant setting in the first point above.

In the second place, love means intimacy. There is no shade of sexuality or procreation in the relationship with Yhwh, in that sense clear boundaries have been set, but there is intimacy between Yhwh and Israel. Yhwh 'knows' what Israel experiences, is aware of her plight and acts on her behalf (Isa. 54:4-8). Such knowing presupposes a precise discernment of the situation of the other party. In that sense, the love of Yhwh is not a general item that is available to everyone in precisely the same form, but it is part of a unique relationship. Israel

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15. As suggested by Ps. 2:4; Gen. 3:8; Ps. 50:3; Ex. 2:25; Isa. 7:13; Ps. 78:65.
is the unique and irreplaceable partner of God and God is the unique and irreplaceable partner of Israel. The relationship between God and Israel is thus a special and intimate form of partnership in which the one for the other is special and incomparable.

In the third place, God's love for Israel implies that he takes pleasure in the people and in their being with him (Jer. 2:2). He enjoys Israel as his partner and does not want to lose her (Hos. 2:21-22). There is a sense of joy and delight in God's partnership with Israel (Isa. 62:4). If there has been a temporary estrangement, a new and fresh start is made, indicating that Israel remains the partner after God's heart.

The claims and promises of this love

The implication of the marriage imagery is that Israel lives within a relationship and within a one-to-one relationship. This partnership, however, is not simply a fact but entails claims and promises. The claims are that Israel should act as a faithful partner and should not regard the relationship with Yhwh as exchangeable or combinable with other partners. In other words, she should not 'commit adultery' but be loyal and faithful to the covenant and the alternative programme of life set out there.

The promising aspects are that God's engagement with Israel is as intense as possible. It is the involvement of love partners. Thus God is found to side with Israel in her distress, to open up perspectives of change and to alter her life (Isa. 54:4-8). He moves beyond the human laws (Jer. 3:1-5) in order to have their partnership restored. That means that Israel can build upon the relationship with Yhwh and live in hopeful expectation. Love means after all that one can expect something from one another. The most essential implication of the marriage imagery may be that Israel does not live across and in that sense apart from God but side by side with him. This imagery characterizes God not as a person on the other side, he in heaven and the people on earth, but as a dynamic partner with whom the people, as beloved other, live side by side. In this respect the partnership expressed in the marriage imagery is the clearest illustration of the notion that God is 'with' his covenant people.

Two key words function as a point of orientation in my attempt to grasp the essence of the marriage imagery. The first key word is 'side by side' and indicates that the marriage imagery entails the promise that Yhwh lives not across or opposite, but side by side with his people. The second key word is 'companionship with Yhwh'. In this respect it is striking to note how the biblical texts conceive of the love of Yhwh. They allude to this love in such a way that it is not simply a circumstance that one can just as well neglect. The essence of the love of Yhwh seems to be that this love from the other side offers security and safety and a companionship from which one can never fall. The companionship with Yhwh, as every love relationship, provides Israel with a home and a future.

God's partner: the answer

The most exciting moment in every declaration of love is the answer that will be given. For to offer love is one thing, but to find it being responded to is still another. In the same sense, the love of God comes only to its fullness in a mutual and a complementary relationship. That is the open end of the biblical marriage
imagery. As a proposal for partnership, this imagery can only end with a question mark and it may be regarded as an invitation to new audiences time and again.