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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Conclusions

The purpose of this study has been to offer a fresh interpretation of a selection of prophetic texts that present the covenant relationship as a marital relationship. The corpus of texts that have been studied consists of Isaiah 50:1-3, 54:1-10, Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2:1-4:4.

The project consists of both a textual and a thematic part. The goal was to pursue the motif of covenant-as-marriage through a number of prophetic texts and to investigate the variety with which this imagery occurs. Primarily, this required a close reading of the mentioned prophetic passages in terms of their structure, context and thrust. After the performance of such an analysis, I could zoom in on the marriage imagery in these texts in order to investigate which accents were present. Secondly, I have focussed on the theme of marriage imagery as such in order to unfold the broader implications of this imagery. What does the use of precisely this imagery tell about the covenant and about the role of both partners?

To be clear, the present work is not a comparative study of the texts under consideration. The purpose has not been to trace the relationships among these texts in terms of tradition history or chronology, but to read these texts as separate voices that share a certain amount of vocabulary and imagery and to bring them together in order to get a fuller picture of that intriguing model of divine and human partnership that is found in these texts.

In chapter one I provide a general introduction to the topic of marriage imagery and delineate the goals and limits of the investigation.

In chapter two I deal with three preliminary issues in relation to the marriage metaphor: the definition of metaphor, the cultural-historical background of the marriage metaphor and the hermeneutical challenge of feminist approaches to the marriage metaphor. These issues constitute the general environment of the investigation. With respect to the influence of external cultural patterns on the biblical metaphor, I arrive at the conclusion that no single explanatory model can explain the biblical marriage imagery. In this respect I argue that the relations between the biblical imagery and the ‘Yhwh and Asherah’ discussion, following the findings in Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Qirbet el-Qom, are only indirect. Further I refute the idea that the phenomenon of the personification of capital cities is the major influential force behind the biblical marriage imagery. All things considered, I agree with Adler’s theory that the inner-biblical analogy between the covenant relationship and marriage, with as central point the exclusive loyalty to one partner, is likely to be the central force behind the biblical marriage metaphor.

In chapter three I develop a reading method for prophetic texts that is synchronic and audience oriented. In connection to the prophecy-or-poetry discussion raised by Auld and Carroll, I plead for a synchronic approach to prophetic texts that leaves historical categories such as ‘the prophet’ and ‘his career’ temporarily aside in order to concentrate on the literary world of meaning within the text. In the understanding, however, that prophecy is not only text but also speech and often address, I develop a model that does justice to the non-descriptive character of prophetic texts. I distinguish three sorts of audience: the primary audience, the implied audience and the contemporary reader. These
categories make it possible to focus on the communicative force of prophetic
texts and to investigate the effect of the text on readers in a reflected way.

In chapter four I explore the marriage imagery in Isaiah 50:1-3 and Isaiah 54.
An important issue in the study of the poems of Deutero-Isaiah has always been
the relevance of the context for the interpretation of the separate units. In the
introduction of this chapter I deal with this issue and refer to the drama ap­
proaches of Beuken and Leene to Isaiah 40-55 as attempts to overcome the prob­
lem of the isolation of the poems within their literary context. More specifically, I
test the hypothesis that the location of the addressed audience is a significant
factor for the interpretation of the different pericopes. My theory is that Isaiah
49-55 circles around Zion and Babylon not only in terms of content but also in
terms of layout. One may conceive of the order of the present units in terms of a
'switching camera' between Babylon and Zion. From this viewpoint I offer
interpretations of Isaiah 50:1-3 and 54:1-10. With respect to the marriage image­
ry in these texts, I conclude that it is part of a larger programme of love and
comfort in Isaiah 40-55.

In chapter five I offer an analysis of Hosea 1-3. Interpretations of this text are
usually fraught with historical and biographical concerns and characterized by a
special interest for the marriage experience of Hosea. I proceed from a strict dis­
tinction between the reality inside and that outside of the text and focus on com­
positional features in the text as a key to the interpretation. The marriage imagery
functions here in a context of confrontation. My conclusion is that in Hosea 1-3
the worship of the baals - and of Yhwh as Baal - is attacked and the nature of
true commitment to Yhwh is defined with help of the notion of the covenant as a
unique and exclusive relationship.

In chapter six I explore the fragments of marriage imagery in Jeremiah 2:1-
4:4. The liberty with which the imagery occurs here is remarkable. A short motto
about the harmony in the marriage at the beginning, a litany concerning the sub­
sequent covenant disloyalty of Israel, a discussion of the possibility of a reunion
of Israel and Yhwh and a tale about Yhwh and his marriage to the two (!) sisters
Judah and Israel are presented in this text in rapid succession. The position of the
marriage imagery in the prologue to this book signifies that the concept of
marriage and the passionate longing of Yhwh for the return of the marriage
partner are programmatic for the book as a whole and serve to underscore the call
for covenant loyalty in the book as a whole.

Together the textual studies in chapters four to six of this book demonstrate
that the endeavour to study prophetic texts in a synchronic way can be rewarding
and that awareness of the larger patterns of coherence in the text beyond the
small literary units can be a fruitful approach in this area of research.

In chapter seven I summarize some theological implications of the marriage
imagery. I list five prominent aspects of this imagery and conclude with three key
words that seem to capture the essence of this imagery. The first is 'side by side'
and indicates that the marriage imagery implies that Yhwh is not living far away
from Israel but 'side by side' in a dynamic and intimate relationship. The second
key word is 'companionship with Yhwh' and indicates that the partnership with
Yhwh is meant to revitalize and to challenge Israel time and again. The third key
word is 'response' and conveys that the most exciting moment in every de­
claration of love is the response that will be given to this love.