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'Let my people go!' The exodus as Israel's metaphorical divorce from Egypt

Nicholas P. Lunn

Nicholas Lunn is a translation consultant and Hebrew tutor with Wycliffe Bible Translators.

I. The marriage of God and Israel

It is a recognized fact that in the Hebrew prophetic tradition the relationship between God and Israel was portrayed metaphorically as a marriage bond. Isaiah presents us with a prime example:

> For your Maker is your husband,
> the LORD of hosts is his name;
> and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer,
> he is called the God of the whole earth.
> For the LORD has called you
> like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
> like a wife of youth when she is rejected,
> says your God.
> For a brief moment I forsook you,
> but with great compassion I will gather you (Isa. 54:5-7).

Hos. 2.16-20 and Ezek. 16.8-14 are other well-known texts employing the same basic metaphor.[1]

Closely related to such a view of the God-Israel relationship is the common use of certain lexical items expressing either fidelity or infidelity towards God. Respecting the former, the term דבק, 'to cleave', occurs describing single-minded devotion to God (e.g. Deut. 4:4; Josh. 22:5). This verb has definite marital connotations, harking back to the original man-woman union in Gen. 2:24. Contrasted to this, the verb זנה, 'play the harlot', is used to describe the Israelite worship of

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1 Recent treatments of this topic include: Nelly Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People: Analysis of a Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1993); Seock-Tae Sohn, *YHWH, the Husband of Israel* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002); Gerlinde Baumann and Linda M. Maloney, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2003); Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel* (Oxford: OUP, 2008); Richard D. Patterson, 'Metaphors of Marriage as Expressions of Divine-Human Relations', *JETS* 51.4 (2008), 689–702.

foreign gods (e.g. Exod. 34:15–16; Num. 25:1; Deut. 31:16; Judg. 2:17; Ezek. 6:9; Hos. 9:1). Such an act was conceived as one of blatant infidelity to the relationship in which the people stood to their God.

Since in the biblical imagery God and Israel are seen as wedded to each other we are not unjustified in inquiring into the time when the wedding, figuratively speaking, took place. In answer to this question the prophets would doubtless point to Sinai and the transactions that transpired there. This is implicit in certain oracles of Jeremiah for instance. In the second chapter Israel is depicted as a bride in the wilderness (v. 2).[2] The later oracle of the new covenant refers back to the old covenant with the fathers as the time when God declared, 'I became their husband' (31:32). The same point in time is implied in the highly figurative depiction of Israel as presented in Ezek. 16. Using language with strong marital overtones,[3] the Lord says, 'I spread the skirt of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you… and you became mine' (v. 8). This, says Instone-Brewer, is a clear reference to Sinai in terms of a marriage covenant.[4]

Post-biblical rabbinic literature concurs in seeing Sinai as the time of the figurative wedlock. In the Babylonian Talmud, for example, *Ta'anit* 26b interprets the phrase 'the day of his wedding' (Cant. 3:11) as 'the day on which the Law was given'. Other later Jewish midrashic texts understand the Sinai event in a similar vein.[5]

II. Indications of the marriage relationship in Exodus

Although it is evident that the prophets and other later sources viewed Sinai in such a light, we may ask whether the Exodus account itself contains any trace of marital connotations for the events that it records. Clearly the term לעם that is prominent in the Exodus material has application to both a divine-human 'covenant' and the marriage 'contract'.[6] This fact alone would seem sufficient to warrant the prophetic marriage imagery. Yet the narrative also gives two further subtle hints that at Sinai God was indeed wedded to his people.

The first of these is in the sixth chapter of Exodus where God instructs Mo-

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2 On this verse, J. A. Thompson comments that here, 'The Sinai relationship is depicted in terms of a marriage' (*The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 163).

3 Cf. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 482–83.

4 David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 47; cf. his earlier comment that 'Sinai can be seen as the point at which God marries his people', 35.

5 Reuven Hammer, *Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist, 1995), 141–42. Other good examples are given in Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews, Vols. III & IV* (Charleston, South Carolina: Forgotten Books, 2008), 50, 59.

6 Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 19; cf. Prov. 2:17; Mal. 2:14.

ses to announce to the Israelites their forthcoming deliverance, and to speak to them the direct words of God, 'I will take you [וְלָקַחְתִּי] to myself [לִי] to be a people [לְעָם], and I will be your God' (v. 7). Most commentators fail to detect the underlying significance of the wording at this point. The verb 'take' with direct object and the twofold occurrence of the preposition ל ('to') is a common formula indicating the act of marriage (e.g. Deut. 21:11; 24:3; 25:5; 1 Sam. 25:39; 2 Sam. 12:9). Sarna, the Jewish commentator, fully appreciates the connotations of these words. He writes, 'The phraseology suggests the institution of marriage, a familiar biblical metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel'. He continues to remark that not only the verb 'take' in the first clause but also the verb phrase 'to be someone's' in the second can both be used in connection with matrimony.[7]

Further marital implications are manifest in the golden calf incident and its aftermath (Exod. 32–34). The calf that the people worshipped was probably modelled upon similar images seen in Egypt.[8] To bow before such a thing was in clear contradiction to the stipulations of the covenant (cf. 20:3–6). The breaking of these terms is vividly expressed through Moses smashing the stone tablets (32:19). The very next verse after this states that Moses 'took the calf they had made and burned it with fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it' (v. 20). This was an unusual thing for Moses to do, to say the least, unless it had some symbolic meaning. Traditional Jewish interpretation rendered the act intelligible by connecting it with the law recorded in Num. 5:12–31 regarding a suspected adulteress. This latter text described a trial by ordeal at the centre of which was the drinking of water mixed with dust (vv. 17, 24). Discussing Exod. 32:20 the Talmud tells us:

> Moses cast the dust of the golden calf into the water not to destroy it thus, but in order that he might give this mixed water to the Israelites to drink, thus testing who of them worshipped the calf, in the same manner as the test of the bitter water was applied by the priest to detect whether a woman has committed adultery [cf. Num. 5:18]. This is clearly shown from the following: 'he strewed it upon the water and made the children of Israel drink of it' [Exod. 32:20].[9]

This understanding of Moses's action was taken up in the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and others.[10] More recent Jewish commentators have endorsed such an interpretation.[11] Sarna claims that the phrase 'great sin' in the

7 Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 32. John I. Durham notes the possible meaning 'take in marriage' for לקח in this verse (*Exodus* [WBC; Waco: Word, 1987], 72).

8 Cf. Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 663, 669.

9 BT Avodah Zarah 44a.

10 Sarna, *Exodus*, 261, fn. 35.

11 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 419; Sarna, *Exodus*, 207.

next verse (32:21, and also vv. 30–31) lends support to this on the grounds that this was a common ancient near-eastern designation for adultery.[12] Further linguistic confirmation may be found in a number of identical terms shared between Exod. 32–34 and the Numbers law. These include 'cause to drink' (Exod. 32:20; Num. 5:24, 26, 27), 'be innocent' (Exod. 34:7; Num. 5:19, 28, 31), 'jealous' (Exod. 34:14; Num. 5:14, 15, 18, 25, 29, 30), 'bear iniquity' (Exod. 34:7; Num. 5:31), 'blot out from a book' (Exod. 32:32–33; Num. 5:23), and the use of the infrequent root פרע, 'be loose', (Exod. 32:25 [twice]; Num. 5:18).[13] From these verbal links it seems reasonable to conclude that the traditional Jewish interpretation is in fact warranted and that underlying the golden calf incident there is a definite trace of the unfaithful wife motif so common in the prophets.

We see then that the Sinai covenant was the definitive event that brought the people of Israel into a figurative marriage bond with the God of their fathers. A necessary consequence of this fact is that such a relationship with Israel did not exist prior to this transaction. All previous mention of an existing covenant up to this point in the patriarchal history is of one between God and the Hebrew forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (e.g. Gen. 15:18; 17:2; Exod. 6:4). Any reference to a covenant with the 'seed' of these men is expressed as a future prospect (e.g. Gen. 17:7). So when God took note of the suffering of Israel in Egypt, it says 'God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' (Exod. 2:24). It does not say 'his covenant *with Israel*'. The first point at which the term 'covenant' is used directly in connection with Israel is Exod. 19:5, after the tribes had arrived at Sinai. Subsequent to the covenant ceremony (ch. 24), the expression 'covenant with Israel' then begins to be used (e.g. 34:27; Lev. 26:9). We may here seem to have stated the obvious, but it is necessary to keep this fact in mind in order to appreciate the use of the phrase 'my people' on the lips of God before the Sinai encounter. This cannot then mean 'my covenant-people'. Rather it must be understood proleptically, as is the plain sense of Exod. 6:7 discussed above: 'I will take you to myself *to be a people*'. In the same way the oft repeated command of God to Pharaoh, 'Let my people go!' considering the larger picture, must be taken as shorthand for 'Let go the people who shall be mine'.

III. Israel bound to another

God's intention, therefore, in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt to Sinai was to enter into a covenant relationship with them, that they might become his 'special possession' (Exod. 19:5), his earthly bride, so to speak. Yet, it is the main

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12 Sarna, *Exodus*, 208, where he notes the Old Testament occurrence of 'great sin/ wickedness' with reference to adultery in Gen. 20:9 and 39:9. Cf. also Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965), 37.

13 Arguably the occurrences of פרע are conceptually related. In one passage it gives a literal description of the people's wantonness, in the other a symbolic (in the loosening of the woman's hair).

purpose of this article to show that this was not possible without one other event happening first. A major obstacle prevented the union between the people of Israel and the God of their fathers – the fact that Israel was not free to marry. She was already bound in a metaphorical marriage-type relationship.

To whom was Israel bound? Later books in the Hebrew canon contain unmistakable references to the not much noted fact that while in Egypt the people of Israel worshipped the gods of Egypt. Joshua clearly mentions this in his farewell address to a later generation of Israelites when he says:

> Put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD (Josh. 24:14).

The prophet Ezekiel reports to Israel the word of God spoken to their fathers when they were in Egypt:

> On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out from the land of Egypt into a land that I had searched out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is the most glorious of all lands. I said to them, 'Cast away, each of you, the detestable things of his eyes, and do not defile yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the LORD your God'. But they rebelled against me and were not willing to listen to me; they did not cast away the detestable things of their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of my name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made myself known to them by bringing them out of the land of Egypt. So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness (Ezek. 20:6-10).

A few chapters later (ch. 23) the same prophet traces the origins of the Israelite tendency to stray after foreign gods to their time in Egypt (see below). These passages unambiguously affirm that the Hebrews worshipped foreign gods, identified as 'the idols of Egypt', during this pre-exodus period.

This overlooked fact has significant repercussions for the purpose of God with Israel. It is our contention here that this worship of the Egyptian gods constituted a spiritual bond with those idol-gods, a bond which could not simply be ignored in the matter of God's desire to wed Israel, that is, to bind her to himself in covenant. We argue that implicit indicators, both conceptual and verbal, are discernible in passages relating to the Egyptian bondage which are sufficient to establish Israel in an already existing figurative marriage-like union, albeit an illicit one, with the idols of Egypt.

One of these indicators has previously been mentioned by implication – the incident involving the golden calf. The worship of an Egyptian-type idol immediately following the covenant ceremony, as we have seen, resulted in the dissolution of the covenant documents, only later renewable through repentance and punishment. This action on the part of Israel undoubtedly seriously impacted the covenant bond. If idolatry hindered union with God in this way, what then would have been the effect of the previous mass worship of the Egyptian idols?

If an existing union could be disrupted by idol-worship, then surely it could prevent the forming of a yet-to-exist union. Evidently Israel could not enter into covenant with the God of their fathers until such an idolatrous relationship had been formally terminated.

In support of the foregoing is the prophetic indictment of Ezek. 23 mentioned above. Speaking of Israel allegorically as two women, representing Samaria and Jerusalem, verse 3 of the chapter states: 'They played the harlot in Egypt, engaging in harlotry there from their youth'. This immoral conduct, under the figure of playing the harlot (זנה), clearly has reference to the worshipping of idols. Verse 37 of the same oracle states 'they played the harlot with their idols', in which the metaphorical and literal are combined. At the close of the chapter such activity is spelled out plainly as 'your sins of idolatry' (v. 49). Verse 3, following the Hebrew literally, reads: 'And-they-played-the-harlot in-Egypt, in-their-youth they-played-harlot there'. One prominent linguistic feature in this word sequence is the fronting of the prepositional phrase in the second clause, marking 'in-their-youth' (בנעוריהן) as having some special focus.[14] What the Hebrew is stressing here is the fact that Israel's proneness to idolatry, expressed metaphorically through the figure of sexual immorality, was to be seen from the very beginnings of the nation, *even* from their youth,[15] when they were in Egypt. Block comments: 'These women's addiction to immoral sexual activity antedates their marriage to Yahweh at Sinai.'[16] Thus a figurative sexual encounter with the Egyptian gods prior to the exodus is evident from Ezekiel's oracle.

How could Israel's idolatrous union with the gods of Egypt be severed? It shall here be argued that this relationship was not terminated merely by the exodus event as such. Rather it was by God demanding Pharaoh to 'Let my people go'. A question neglected in the commentaries is why Moses was directed to ask permission from the Egyptian king to release the people. God had already demonstrated to Moses his supernatural power, symbolized by the staff in Moses' hand. Without doubt God could have displayed that power on behalf of Israel in such a way that what Pharaoh had to say on the matter would be a total irrelevancy (cf. Exod. 9:15). Yet God did not act in such a way. The fact remains that time and again Moses appeared before the king to demand the release of the Hebrews, using the signs and wonders as a means of applying pressure on him to do so. The account suggests that Pharaoh had some hold over the people to which a wholesale use of force was not the answer. That the king should grant permission was clearly a vital element in the departure of Israel from Egypt.

What, we may ask, was so important about Pharaoh and his required permis-

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14 See Jean-Marc Heimerdinger, *Topic, Focus and Foreground in Ancient Hebrew Narratives* (JSOT SuppS 295; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), chapter 5, especially 180–81.

15 NLT adds 'even' at this point; cf. also the comment of Keil, 'They committed whoredom even in Egypt in their youth', in C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 9* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 185.

16 Block, *Ezekiel Chapters 1-24*, 734.

sion? Firstly, it is a known fact that the kings of Egypt were believed to be intimately related to the nation's gods. The Pharaoh was held to be the embodiment of Horus, and son of the solar deity Rē. As such he was considered 'God-King on earth'.[17] This being so, the appearance of Moses in Pharaoh's presence on behalf of Yahweh God of Israel and to direct the words of the latter to him was in effect to address the gods of Egypt through their earthly representative. In this context Stuart comments: 'It is easy to assume that the contest for Israelite deliverance was between Moses and Pharaoh, or between Israel and Pharaoh, or between Israel and Egypt. It was none of these. Rather, it was between Yahweh and Egypt's gods, the pharaoh being a devotee of, representative of, and human focal point for those gods.'[18] Hence the manifestation of God's power was not just against Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, but also against the Egyptian deities, as explicitly stated in Exod. 12:12 (cf. Num. 33:4).[19]

Secondly, the matter that God demanded of Pharaoh was expressly to let the Hebrews go. Here 'let … go' represents a single Hebrew verb, שלח in the Piel form. This word unquestionably functions as the leading *Leitwort* in the exodus narrative,[20] occurring over forty times in Exod. 3–14. Nine of these occur in the same demand for Pharaoh to 'Let my people go'. In almost all of the other instances Pharaoh himself is the grammatical subject of the verb.

What we consider highly significant in the repeated use of שלח in addressing Pharaoh is that, besides the meaning 'let go', this Hebrew verb, in the same Piel form, also has the sense of 'divorce'.[21] In the Deuteromonic marriage laws (Deut. 22:19, 29), as well as in the prophetic imagery of Israel as the wife of her God (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8), שלח appears as the principal verb for the dissolution of the marriage-bond. In each of these cases it is the male partner who constitutes the subject of the verb – the husband in the law, and God in the prophets – that is, it is husband/God who initiates the separation.

Therefore when he presented himself as God's spokesman before the king of Egypt, Moses was telling him, as the embodiment of Egypt and the earthly representative of the Egyptian gods, to grant a 'divorce' to the people of Israel. What was being demanded was not merely a release from physical bondage, but a formal ending of their spiritual union to the gods of the land. Pharaoh, as the mouthpiece of those gods, was the one from whom the declaration of the annul-

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17 David P. Silverman, *Ancient Egypt* (London: Duncan Baird, 1997), 108. John D. Currid maintains that the Pharaoh was actually considered divine, see *A Study Commentary on Exodus, Vol. 1 Chapters 1-18* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2000), 113-15, 131.

18 Stuart, *Exodus*, 159.

19 Cf. John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 108-109.

20 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 92-97.

21 F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1953), 1019a. As an alternative or parallel to שלח in the Exodus narrative the verb גרשׁ is sometimes found (6:1; 11:1; 12:39). This latter also is associated with the idea of 'divorce'; cf. Lev. 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num. 30:10; Ezek. 44:22.

ment was required.[22] Viewed in this light we can see why the God of the Hebrews could not simply wrench them from the grasp of Pharaoh. It was necessary for the latter to announce that he was letting the Israelites go in order to annul their relationship with the gods he represented.

Not only does the key term שׁלח point to the exodus as a spiritual divorce, but there is one other significant detail in the narrative that can be understood against such a background. Three times mention is made of the Hebrews receiving certain valuable commodities from the Egyptians upon their departure (Exod. 3:22; 11:2; 12:35). The first of these states: 'Every woman shall ask of her neighbour and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver and articles of gold and clothing'. All three references include objects of silver and gold, and two of them clothing. What is happening here? Why should the Egyptians give anything to the Hebrews when they leave, especially things of such worth?[23] It is here suggested that one way to view these gifts is from the perspective of the metaphorical divorce which is taking place when the people of Israel leave Egypt. Though not explicitly stated in the Hebrew scriptures, it may be inferred from what is known of ancient practices, that in the event of a divorce the husband was required to make a form of payment to his former wife. This was the procedure explicitly laid down in the laws of Hammurabi[24] and is attested in the Elephantine papyri.[25] Details of the practice are laid out in the early rabbinic writings[26] and it remains the standard Jewish custom to the present day. Biblically it has been claimed to be implicit in the marriage laws of the Mosaic code.[27]

The three categories of articles given to the Israelites have their closest verbal parallel in a passage from Genesis. There in 24:53 it also speaks of 'articles of silver and articles of gold and clothing'. Only the Hebrew word for clothing is different, בגדים in Genesis and שׂמלת in Exodus, yet as both of these are translated by ἱματισμός in the LXX they are evidently synonymous terms. The significant thing about this particular verse in Genesis is that it depicts gifts given in a marriage context, that of Rebekah being taken as a bride for Isaac. Such items as these, the evidence suggests, would belong to the woman should the marriage be disrupted by a divorce. At the departure from Egypt precisely the same gifts were given to the Israelites or, to be more exact, to the Israelite women (Exod. 3:22). Apparently there was an appropriateness in the women in particular carrying

22 For the declaration of divorce in the Old Testament, see De Vaux, *Ancient* Israel, 35.
23 In consideration of this question, we note that the translation of the verb נצל as 'plundered' is strongly countered by Benno Jacob. He claims the idea of plundering the Egyptians is not at all present in the text. See the detailed discussion in *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav, 1992), 337–46.
24 Jacob, *Second Book*, 701.
25 De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 36.
26 See, for example, Mishnah, *Ketubot*, ch. 7.
27 J. M. Sprinkle, *'The Book of the Covenant': A Literary Approach* (JSOT SuppS 174; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 158. Sprinkle states that 'part of the brideprice (מהר) was customarily returned to the maiden as a dowry that would remain hers in case of divorce'. Cf. also De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 36.

away these items, a fact which fits well into the marriage-divorce metaphor.

Lastly in this section, we draw attention to the use of the term ענה, having the basic meaning of 'to afflict, to humble' in the Piel form. This is the verb that occurs, together with its nominal cognate (עני), with reference to the Egyptian oppression of the Hebrews (Exod. 1:11, 12; cf. Gen. 15:13; Exod. 3:7; 4:31). ענה is variously translated by the LXX as κακόω ('to harm') or ταπεινόω ('to humble'), e.g. καθότι δὲ αὐτοὺς ἐταπείνουν [יענו], 'as they humbled them' (Exod. 1:12). This same Piel form of ענה may also mean 'humble' in the sense of 'violate' sexually.[28] It occurs with this meaning in Deut. 21:14 in the context of a marital law, where the LXX renders it as ἐταπείνωσας αὐτήν ('you humbled her').[29] ענה appears again in another law pertaining to marriage in Deut. 22:29, where the Greek has ἐταπείνωσεν αὐτήν ('he humbled her'). Both these laws relate not to ordinary contracted marriages but to special cases in which an element of force is involved, a situation not dissimilar to that of Israel in Egypt. The Israelites were forcibly enslaved, though their subsequent devotion to the Egyptian gods would seem voluntary, for which they were culpable.

These foregoing facts concerning ענה are mentioned merely to show the lexical overlap existing between the Egyptian bondage and certain laws pertaining to forced sexual union. It is not unreasonable to suppose that where there is an overlap in lexis, there is a corresponding overlap in conceptuality. As a man may forcibly take a woman for sexual purposes, so Pharaoh forcibly took Israel resulting in the illicit union between the Israelites and the gods of Egypt.

IV. Typological corroboration

Support for the presence of a marital metaphor in the relationship of the enslaved Hebrews to the Egyptians is found in Gen. 12:10–20, describing the descent of Abraham and Sarah into Egypt. This account contains an example of what John Sailhamer terms 'narrative typology'. Such a narrative forms 'part of a larger typological scheme intending to show that future events are often foreshadowed in past events'.[30] He claims that the record in Gen. 12 has been intentionally structured to prefigure or foreshadow the events of Israel's sojourn in Egypt and the exodus.[31] A significant number of Old Testament scholars concur with this particular function of the passage.[32]

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28 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 776a.

29 Immediately preceding this is the rare Hebrew verb התעמר, 'to deal tyrannically' (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 771b). In the only other Old Testament occurrence of this verb (Deut. 24:7), the LXX employs the verb καταδυναστεύω ('to oppress'), another word applicable to the Egyptian oppression of Israel (see LXX of Exod. 1:13; 6:7; Wisd. 17:2).

30 John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 37.

31 Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 38.

32 E.g. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 2: From Abraham to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), 334–36; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*,

The most notable correspondences between the Genesis account and the events relating to the exodus are as follows:

(1) severe famine as the cause of the migration from Canaan (Gen. 12:10);
(2) Abraham and Sarah sojourn in the land of Egypt (Gen. 12:10);
(3) conflict with Pharaoh (Gen. 12:18-19);
(4) God struck the Egyptians with plagues (Gen. 12:17);
(5) Abraham is enriched through the Egyptians (Gen. 12:16);
(6) Pharaoh 'sent away' [שׁלח] Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 12:20);
(7) Abraham journeys back to the promised land (Gen. 13:3).

All these elements have close counterparts in the exodus account, to which a number of other lesser details could be added.[33]

Significantly for our purposes, we observe the place given to riches (v. 16). Abraham received these in association with the taking of Sarah, suggesting some connection with the practice of giving the bride-money. When Sarah was released, the patriarch was allowed to take these gifts away with him. There is an obvious correspondence in this respect with what the Israelites did at the time of the exodus. We also draw attention to the occurrence of the verb שׁלח, 'send away/divorce' (v. 20) which, as noted earlier, functions as a major *Leitwort* in the exodus narrative.

Even more important, however, is the expression found on the lips of Pharaoh (v. 19), 'and I took her to myself as a wife'. This is the same marriage formula as echoed by God in Exod. 6:7 speaking of the people of Israel (see section 2 above). In the Gen. 12 parallel we see that Sarah, the Hebrew matriarch, is explicitly taken by Pharaoh to be his wife. Here then is a literal marriage-type relationship between the king of Egypt and the mother of Israel. Whether the marriage was consummated or not is debatable, yet here we are concerned with the figurative significance not the literality. From this taking of Sarah to be wife of the Egyptian god-king, we see foreshadowed the taking of the Hebrews into a metaphorical union with Egypt and its gods. As the mother of Israel was pressed into a prospective physical relationship with Pharaoh, so her offspring would enter into a spiritual relationship with the gods that Pharaoh embodied.

V. Theological implications

In the foregoing sections we have presented a case for seeing in the sub-strata of the exodus account the presence of a spiritual marriage metaphor between Israel and the gods of Egypt. We are not arguing, it should be stressed, that this

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WBC (Nashville: Nelson, 1987), 291–92; Terence E. Fretheim, 'Genesis', in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 429; Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 217.

33 E.g. the sequence 'Take… and go' in Gen. 12:19 and Exod. 12:32; and the issue of letting the female live and putting the male to death in Gen. 12:12 and Exod. 1:16–18, using identical terminology. See further details in Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 141–43.

is the only metaphor applied to the exodus event. This is evidently not the case. In the book of Exodus itself and in prophetic reflections upon the exodus event other metaphors are clearly discernible. Explicitly present in Exodus, for example, is the figure of Israel as Yahweh's 'son' (Exod. 4:22; cf. Deut. 33:6). Though the two metaphors of marriage and sonship may seem irreconcilable, that is only true from the perspective of a rigidly literalist interpretation, which is certainly not intended. The fact is that the prophets knew and employed both metaphors with reference to Israel, even in the same context. Thus Jeremiah in one breath speaks of the nation as 'a wife unfaithful to her husband' (3:20), but in the next as 'faithless sons' (3:22); one moment Israel is depicted as a virgin bride (31:4), the next as God's firstborn son (31:9). The prophet Hosea, as is well known, employs the marriage metaphor extensively in chapters 1–3, then that of sonship in chapter 11. Each metaphor contributes its own particular meaning which should be allowed its own weight without attempting harmonization with the other.

What then is the underlying import of the marriage metaphor in connection with the exodus? Chiefly it alerts us to the fact that the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt was not merely an event of politico-economic significance. The enslavement of Israel surpassed purely physical bondage and had implications in the spiritual realm also. That the exodus had significance on multiple levels, including the spiritual, has been recognized by Christopher Wright, who writes:

> One outstanding feature of the redemption achieved at the exodus was its comprehensiveness. In that one sequence of events God gave to Israel a fourfold freedom: (1) politically, from the tyranny of a foreign autocratic power; (2) socially, from intolerable interference in their family life; (3) economically, from the burden of enforced slave labour; and (4) spiritually, from the realm of foreign gods.[34]

Wright later makes the following relevant comment on 'spiritual powers':

> We must not overlook the Bible's teaching on the spiritual battle that lies behind the historical work of redemption, the conflict between the rule of God and the usurped rule of Satan, 'the Prince of this world' and all the demonic forces at his command. The Old Testament does not have, of course, a developed 'satanology'. But there are hints in the Old Testament of an awareness of a world of spiritual, invisible powers that lie behind the institutions and 'personifications' of state, that lies behind the overwhelming force of political power.[35]

Pharaoh, we have seen, was one such 'personification'. Yet it was not simply the case that the Israelites were under his political dominion as his slaves, but together with this through their worship of Egyptian gods they were in spiritual

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34 Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 156.

35 Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 218.

bondage to the deities that Pharaoh represented.[36] This spiritual relationship needed first to be broken before a new covenantal relationship could be formed with God.[37]

Furthermore, the union of the Israelites with the gods of Egypt also undergirds the need for the application of the passover blood. The fact is that the Hebrews were only spared the slaying of their firstborn from the destroying angel through the protection of the lamb's blood, the implication being that of themselves they were deserving of an equal judgment to the Egyptians. Since both were implicated in the same idolatrous worship, this provision was an act of pure grace. Seen in the light of what has been said, Israel was plainly not Yahweh's spotless bride, as one would have thought appropriate as a match for God. On the contrary, she was guilty of both pre-marital wantonness as well as later post-marital infidelity. Yet God had elected such a people to be his 'holy nation'. Despite their dalliance with the gods of Egypt he made his covenant with them, and despite their idolatrous revelling before the golden calf he renewed his covenant with them. This is a reflection on the character of God – not that he settles for second best, but that

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36 Against this background we can appreciate more the interpretation of Gen. 1 which argues for the text as a Mosaic polemic against the gods of Egypt. See, for example, John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Genesis, Vol. 1, 1:1–25:18* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2003), 47–51.

37 This spiritual dimension has important ramifications when we consider the paradigmatic nature of the deliverance from Egypt. The exodus has been described as the 'paradigm' or 'pattern' of all God's redemptive work (Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 156; Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* [Leicester: IVP, 1991], 130–31). Recent studies draw parallels between the deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the return from the Babylonian captivity, and the ultimate salvation through Christ. Regarding this latter, of all the New Testament writers John and Paul more than the others bring out the spiritual dimension of the bondage in which the whole of mankind is held. In John chapter 8, in a passage claimed to have exodus overtones (Paul Hoskins, 'Freedom from Slavery to Sin and the Devil: John 8:31-47 and the Passover Theme of the Gospel of John', a paper presented at the Tyndale House Biblical Theology Study Group, Cambridge, July 10, 2008), Jesus declares that 'everyone who sins is a slave to sin' (v. 34). Yet this was not a purely moral predicament since ultimately the cause for such enslavement could be traced to belonging to the devil (v. 44). In order to accomplish complete salvation from this state it was necessary for 'the ruler of this world' to be judged (16:11; cf. 12:31), in like fashion to the judgment of the gods of Egypt at the exodus. When countering the views of the Judaizers in Galatians, Paul strongly plays on the slave/free contrast. In chapter 4 especially he speaks of the previous spiritual bondage which his readers once experienced. He explains that 'we were in slavery under the elements [στοιχεῖα] of the world' (v. 3). The repetition of the word στοιχεῖα in v. 9 (after the statement in v. 8 that 'you were slaves to those by nature which are not gods') favours taking its meaning as 'elemental spirits' (as NRSV; cf. NLT), the interpretation advocated by Cullmann and others (O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* [London: SCM, 1963], 77; John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* [Leicester: IVP, 1993], 104–05, 108). The irony in Paul's exposition, however, is that the Sinai covenant, originally associated with freedom from slavery, has now through the legalism of his opponents, became a cause of bondage.

he takes what is defiled in order to sanctify it, ultimately, in the New Testament use of the marriage metaphor, to present to himself 'a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Eph. 5:26–27).

Abstract

This article builds upon the prophetic metaphor of Israel being bound to God in a marriage-type relationship, commenced in the Sinai covenant, in which worship of foreign gods would be considered spiritual adultery. It is argued that similar involvement with foreign deities before Sinai, would hinder union between God and his people. Biblical evidence suggests that the Hebrews in Egypt were implicated in the worship of the idols of that nation, which in effect constituted a marriage-type relationship with false gods. Without the termination of this relationship the people could not enter into a covenant bond with Yahweh. On verbal grounds the demand of Moses from Pharaoh to release the Hebrews amounts to a spiritual divorce from the gods of Egypt. Typological considerations lend support to such a construal of the exodus.