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Scripture

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LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

(Translated from the French by F. Burke)

By way of introduction a few words of warning seem necessary since the subject is so much less simple than might appear at first sight. To begin with it is not easy to avoid anachronism. There is the danger of projecting our own ideas into our sources. It is obvious to everybody that we are widely separated from the patriarchs, from Moses and the prophets, both in time and space. The difficulty of accurately assessing the consequences of this obvious fact cannot be exaggerated. It is not merely institutions which have changed, but also habits of thought. Now it is always an extremely delicate manoeuvre to pass from one habit of thought to another, whether it be in the temporal or the spatial sense. In fact we are bound to fail to some extent ; a certain degree of misapprehension concerning the past is inevitable. My task will be to prevent in the first place this misapprehension from distorting the essential truth of the matter. Then again, one might easily give way to another temptation : it is easier to give a kind of global interpretation of the texts, as if everything read in the Bible about love and marriage was, without more ado, to be called 'Biblical,' and thereby be regarded as unchangeable. Actually it is the intention of the authors or editors which is decisive here. The limits within which each of them confined his attention cannot lightly be exceeded. Indeed these limits stand as a warning that outside of them the field of inspiration has already been left behind. The weight, crushing at times, of the problems connected with our existing Christian consciousness is no excuse for us to search at random in the Bible for support which it was not God's intention to give us therein. The Bible is not our only resort. We cannot misuse it to cover our own liabilities. Whatever its value be, the bearing which the Bible has on the problem of marriage does not amount to the same thing as supplying us with a ready-made solution from every point of view. We shall far better lay hold of the real enrichment it is capable of providing, by a correctly adjusted attitude towards it.

Thus it is to the point to emphasise right from the beginning, that it would be profitless, for instance, to seek from the Bible any reply other than an indirect one, to the many varied problems which follow from the appreciable raising of the average age at which young boys and girls enter marriage. The Bible is not familiar with our long-drawn-out period of adolescence, but it must immediately be said that this was above all a matter of a particular civilisation and culture, and not of a privileged position in God's eyes. Hence we must not be too hasty to give the name 'Biblical' to everything which perhaps in a very ordinary way is found 'in the Bible.' A host of misunderstandings still arise from day to day, both in the theological and pastoral spheres, as a result of not observing this modest distinction. Moreover it must be acknowledged, in fairness to everybody, that whilst it is apparently elementary as an abstract formula, such discrimination proves much less simple in individual cases. To confine ourselves to the basic elements of our subject, nothing is more difficult than to separate, in the view of love presented in the Bible, the truly lasting qualities, capable of being smoothly assimilated into the Christian sacrament, and the merely circumstantial qualities which are consequently more or less ephemeral. The eternal emotion which is love has none the less a whole history behind it, a history which is very far from being a mere repetition of the same attitudes, actions and words from generation to generation.¹

On the other hand it is also possible that the full significance of a teaching, of a fact or of a certain state of affairs implied in the Bible should for us at the present time, really go beyond the narrower perspective to which the sacred author confined himself. We can look back on the past and draw on the profound experience which centuries of existence have given to the Church, and this is in certain cases a positive advantage allowing us to judge the true proportions of what existed in the past. Some fundamental elements of the family system then existing will thus come under our consideration, in spite of the fact that the sacred authors do not appear to have explicitly given them their attention.

Even thus abridged, the subject is still vast. Without going into too many details, we shall have dealt with what is essential if, after an important preliminary observation on the triple relationship of individual, family and people in Jewish antiquity, we afterwards sift out, from our own standpoint, whatever may be gathered from the first two narratives of Genesis relating the creation of man and woman ; then from the great prophetic image of the love of Yahweh and

¹ We are given a glimpse of this history, for the period relatively close to us, by D. de Rougemont, *L'amour et l'Occident* (Présences), Paris 1939.

Israel (cf. Osee), and finally from the general meaning of the Canticle of Canticles, which reflects betrothal customs before the post-exilic Sages made of this song, then falling into oblivion, a text which was henceforth almost completely severed from the concrete circumstances which had given it birth.

Individual, family and people The tenth chapter of Genesis is doubtless one of the least read in the Bible. The specialists with professional interests have given it the title 'Table of the Nations.' They examine it from different points of view : historical, ethnological, topographical and so on. It is clear, however, that the editor's final intention was quite different, and that it is a grave error from the theological point of view to rate this passage as an unimportant curiosity. I do not wish to exaggerate, but I find it hard to believe that we can really understand Genesis without giving close attention to this long genealogy of Noe's three sons. It is hardly necessary to add that if the book of Genesis is badly interpreted, it is our understanding of the remainder (including certain essential parts of the New Testament) which suffers. In effect, the genealogy of the tenth chapter of Genesis is inseparable in the mind of the editor (the priestly tradition), not only from all the documents which are of the same kind or related, and which are met with in abundance in the Pentateuch, but also from the two Creation accounts themselves (Gen. 1-2). Now what is it that begins to take shape here ? It is the whole structure of the story of salvation, and hence the whole internal order and unity of God's plan, as understood by the faith of Israel and inherited by Christianity. In fact it is no mere chance, nor simple literary convenience which produced immediately prior to the chronicles of Abraham's lineage, an account of the creation of man and woman integrated on the one hand in an account of the beginnings of the world which is their home, and accompanied on the other hand by an explanation of the existence of good and evil in human destiny by the first blessing and curse.¹ In this vision Adam and Eve form the one and only genealogical root of humanity. Hence their descendants constitute a single family within which, subject to unending variations of quality and extent, the original blessing and curse are passed on as an inheritance. Now the first blessing, as effective in the thought of

¹ 'Curse' is a word to be understood with reserve and in a relative sense, allowing for the well-known tendency of the Jewish mind towards violent contrasts. In Hebrew strong convictions are vigorously expressed. There is no grey, but black and white without any intermediate shades. Thus the 'curse' boils down to what is in fact a more or less attenuated blessing : see, for example, the 'curse' pronounced against Cain (Gen. 4:11-16) ; and the 'blessing' of Esau which follows that of Jacob (Gen. 27:27-9, 39-40).

the editor as the creative word itself, is that of fruitfulness : ' And God created man to His own image ; to the image of God He created him. Male and female He created them. And God blessed them, saying : increase, and multiply, and fill the earth . . . ' (Gen. 1:27-8). At this point we can understand the profound reason which led the editors of Genesis to develop their accounts within a genealogical framework. It is their pondered faith and hope which spontaneously develop, persuaded of the unity of origin of the great human family. So the genealogy of Noe's sons in Gen. 10 is far from being a merely accessory curiosity which the reader might leave on one side. On the contrary, it emphasises the primary thing to be understood. It is, if you wish, the stage at which the skeleton of the building has been exposed to view. Moreover, with this in mind, you need do no more than read any chronicle in the Old Testament prior to the period of the monarchy to realise the persistence of this phenomenon. The frame is always a genealogical one. It may be more obvious in those accounts in Genesis which precede the history of the patriarchs (ch. 1-11). This is natural. But it is never lost sight of in what follows. Its ultimate meaning likewise remains always the same.

In point of fact it is only after the setting up of the monarchy that a dynastic framework, comparable to that found in all the chronicles of the ancient East, becomes possible in Israel.¹ It is common knowledge that this plan was adopted in particular by the editor of the book of Kings. However, it is relevant to notice the fact that the relatively late adoption of the dynastic framework had a purpose, theological or literary, far more restricted than had been that of the ancient genealogical framework. Actually the latter was never ousted by the former. I add, in order to put everything in its proper place, that this genealogical framework within which the faith of Israel pictured the basic history of mankind, is still not rendered void in every respect by the chronological (sidereal) framework, more or less definite and all embracing, which we can now superimpose on it. From the theological point of view, the only plan which is truly connatural to the story of salvation as the sacred authors understood it, remains the genealogical one of which Genesis gives us the essential outlines. This is seen clearly in the New Testament also. It is the ancient genealogical framework which is everywhere presupposed, deep down, in the elaboration and continuation of God's plan. Jesus, who is of ' the house of David,' announces to the ' house of Israel ' the ' good news ' of God's kingdom. Now the house of Israel obviously means the descendants of Jacob, as a long history of faith,

¹ cf. P. van der Meer, *The Chronology of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Leiden 1955 *passim*

suffering, mercy, grace and hope had modelled them. But the descendants of the patriarchs from generation to generation evoked the passing on of the inheritance of blessings and promises. The genealogical framework is evident. It shows itself even more clearly in several particular places. The genealogy which Luke gives after his account of the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:23-38) is an imposing résumé of the whole of ancient history, considered as a long preparation for the gospel. It is, again, quite remarkable how the ascending genealogy of the third gospel, contrary to the genealogy by descent of Matthew which begins at Abraham (Matt. 1:1-16), goes right back to the first man and woman, and from them to God Himself. We are thus at one stroke brought back to the creation accounts in the very first pages of Genesis. It would be impossible to underline in a more striking manner the fact that the 'good news' announced by Jesus was the continuation of the original blessing, beyond the privileges of Abraham's descendants. The thought of Paul himself also, every time it comes up against the problem of the universality of the gospel, moves within the genealogical framework familiar to the whole of ancient tradition. This fact stands out particularly in the Epistle to the Romans and in the epistles of the captivity (Eph., Phil., Col.). I shall quote one text only, which I think is perfectly clear: 'Remember that of old, you the Gentiles in the flesh (a reference to circumcision) . . ., you were at that time without Christ (without a Messiah), shut out from the community of Israel (the 'house of Israel'), not belonging to the alliance of the promise, and having neither hope nor God in this world! Well now, at the present time, in Christ (the Messiah) Jesus, you who were formerly afar off, you have been brought near, thanks to the blood of Christ. For it is he who is our peace, he who out of these two (Jews and Gentiles) has made one people, destroying the barrier which was separating them, doing away, in his flesh, with the enmity (fostered by) the law of precepts with its decrees (the law of Moses, the precepts of which singled out the Jewish people and separated it from other peoples), in order to mould (lit. create) the two into a single new man (the second Adam) and to bring about peace between them and reconcile them with God. He came to proclaim peace, peace for yourselves who were afar off, and peace too for those who were near. . . . In this way, then, you are no longer foreigners nor visitors; you are fellow citizens of the saints (Israel), you are of the house of God' (Eph. 2:11-19).

This extraordinary vision of the fulfilment of God's plan could not, from our point of view, have ended with more characteristic expressions. It is no longer merely Israel, but also the peoples scattered from the beginning (Gen. 11) and hence excluded from the inheritance

and the promise (Gen. 12 ff.), who are now reconciled and, so to speak, gathered together, 'thanks to the blood of Christ,' in the one and only 'house of God.' All is restored. There is now but one God and Father of all, a single 'house' of the saints, in which there are neither foreigners nor guests, a single new blessing, a single inheritance promised to the offspring of this humanity now recreated in Christ. The name 'church' is not mentioned, but it is quite clear that it is there. It is itself the new 'people of God.'¹

In spite of appearances I have not forgotten my subject. We are at the heart of the matter. That is in no way a paradox: it is a question of distinguishing various points of view. When we say 'family' we think of marriage, father, mother, children, education and so on. The human group towards which our attention is spontaneously attracted is one which is reduced to its ultimate limit: a limit which, as a matter of fact, is the next thing to the individual. For us, what a marriage does is to 'found' a home, to give birth to a family. Before one has gone far from the latter, moreover, the ties of relationship begin to be strained, and soon snap completely. Thus family problems are in our eyes immediately connected with individual problems: to a large extent they are reciprocal. Beyond the family unit whose limits are precisely defined by the fruitfulness of the marriage in the first generation (or near enough to it), the assimilation of the individual into higher groupings ordinarily comes about for us along lines other than those resulting from birth, such as school, trade, profession, nationality, international association or religion. But it is to our world that these factors belong, not, generally speaking, to the world of the ancients, and in particular to that of Israel.² There have been in the meantime enormous changes in the forms of civilisation, and culture and habit of thought. The convergence of these has gradually led the individual to take upon himself an increasingly greater measure of autonomy. This autonomy has brought with it his present condition, which is one of isolation. Numerous links have thus been broken. The family could not escape this evolution and it has followed suit. Many and varied historical circumstances have progressively brought it nearer to the kind of existence proper to the individual, or perhaps rather to the kind of existence proper to those

¹ 'People' should be taken here in the sense it generally has in the Bible, especially when it is a question of Israel. The first implication of the term is that of a common ancestor. A 'people' has first a 'father,' then an 'inheritance': land, customs, laws, institutions, traditions, etc. But it is descent from one single ancestor which is the deciding factor among all the rest. These ideas, it must be admitted, have become somewhat foreign to our way of thinking.

² It goes without saying that I am speaking here of an antiquity to which we are more directly indebted for what we have become: that of the Middle and Near East, and Greek and Roman antiquity.

individuals who were its own children, now emancipated at an increasingly tender age, certainly in their own minds, if not always in the mind of the law. This is the stage at which we have now arrived. But a fact which must be recognised is that this evolution has brought us a long way ; in fact, we have moved from a time in history when the opposite seemed the natural thing, namely that the family should develop into a people, and when, inversely, it was hardly intelligible that a people should have no father to whom it could appeal.

It is above all from this point of view, and not from ours, that the faith and reason of Israel regarded the institution of marriage. We cannot forget this if we are intent on properly assimilating what they have to offer us. It is against this background of the family becoming a people that Israel's faith and reason most effectively prepared for the church. In the course of the evolution which led toward the latter there were in fact discovered, little by little, some of the precious things on which Christian hope will continue to nourish itself: the fatherhood of God, the adoption, the new and eternal alliance, the rights of the first-born Christ (Rom. 8:28-30 ; Col. 1:15, 18), the promise which cannot fail, the blessing and the inheritance. In order to understand ourselves and sustain our fidelity we could do no better here than 'bear in mind the rock from which we have been hewn.' Nevertheless there exists, even in Jewish antiquity, a counterpoise which assures the balance. The family, which at one extreme, tends to take to itself the kind of existence proper to the people, is nevertheless not absorbed by the people: it becomes integrated therein. More precisely, the counterweight is provided by that aspect of the family under which it appears as the common life and mutual love of a man and woman. It is understandable, furthermore, that in this respect marriage should have been conducive, after a fashion, to a reversal of the first tendency. For if the family, by the extension of its fruitfulness, tends in certain circumstances to form a people, it is nonetheless manifest that through the inevitable renewal of conjugal relations in each generation it tends at the same time to create and keep in being more circumscribed units: first of all in the union of husband and wife, then in that of father, mother and their immediate descendants.

In this respect I think it is a remarkable fact that the faith of Israel, so expansive over the first factor (the people), should have had so little to tell us about the second (married partners). This difference is a good indication of where attention was principally focused. The family is first and foremost the people, and in a very special way the people *par excellence*, namely the posterity of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of which, in a sense, Yahweh is the real father. However it is probably not less significant that on the rare occasions when ancient Jewish

tradition felt the need to express its basic concept of marriage, it should have chosen to do so in the Creation accounts (Gen. 1-2). This displays the universality and grandeur of this concept to the full. In the genealogical framework of Genesis it is obviously not by chance that marriage is brought to the fore at the same time as the very act which, on God's side, gives birth to the great human family. The two aspects are on a par.

The creation of man and woman Nevertheless it is important to take a closer look at these facts. Genesis begins with two accounts of the creation. It is quite permissible to present them in the aggregate if one's purpose is limited. But the proceeding carries with it a great risk of confusion. It is much better for our subject to distinguish what really is distinct. The two accounts do in fact belong to literary traditions which are more or less independent, and whose individual characters are now fairly well defined. Each of these traditions has its distinctive preferences, manner, style and above all its own points of view. The first account of Creation (Gen. 1:1-2:4a) is worked out within the framework of the six days of the week and a seventh day, the sabbath, as a day of rest. The second account (Gen. 2:4b-25) is composed within a framework which is no longer temporal, but 'geographical,' that of the 'earthly paradise,' and it is followed by the account of the Fall (Gen. 3:1-24). For our particular purpose here we must notice the very definite difference of intention in both editors. The first treats at some length of the creation of heaven and earth, and passes quite quickly over the creation of man. The second, on the contrary, treats at length of the creation of man, and is content with a few schematic references to the origin of the rest of the world. But there is one point which is perhaps even more typical of the difference of intention in the work of each editor, and this is the creation of man and woman, conjoined in the first and separated in the second. The texts are well known, but perhaps it will not be amiss to examine them once again. The first account reads as follows: ' (On the sixth day) God said: let us make man to Our image, in Our likeness, and let him be master of the fish in the sea, of the birds of the heavens, of the domestic animals, and of the whole earth, and of all the reptiles which crawl upon the earth. And God created man to His own image: to the image of God He created him: He created them male and female. Then God blessed them and said to them: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and bring it into subjection; rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of the heavens, and over all the beasts which crawl upon the earth. . . . Now God saw all that He had made, and lo! it was very good' (Gen. 1:26-31).

You will have noticed the choice of words and the gradual development. In the first part of the text the subject is 'man' only, without any explicit distinction of sex. It is 'man' thus regarded who is created 'to the image of God.'¹ We can see the idea: God, inasmuch as He is the creator of everything, is obviously also its master. But 'man' created by God has received from Him a share in His sovereignty as it were; he is, in fact, to some extent master of the earth, his dwelling-place. This obvious and explicitly stated quality leads to the mention of that more mysterious quality which is its explanation: if 'man' is master in his own dwelling-place as God is master of the universe, it is because he must have in him, from his very origin, some 'likeness' to his creator. Hence the words: 'man' was created 'to the image of God.' Moreover there is no further determination by the narrator: it is 'man,' in the organic unity of the two sexes, inasmuch as both exercise a joint sovereignty over the earth on which they live, who is created 'to the image of God.' As regards this divine likeness, then, the body is not excluded from it or simply left on one side, as perhaps one might be inclined to think. In the writer's intention, what has been made in the image of God is the total being of man and woman, as static individuals, no doubt, but also and still more in that active union through which both exercise as stewards what the author calls their rule over the earth, regarded, in a sense, as their inheritance.

Such at least is the natural sense of the expressions used, due regard being had to the literary form of the account as a whole. Moreover in this way an explanation is found without any difficulty, for a transition which otherwise comes as much more of a shock: 'God created man in His own image: in the image of God He created him; He created *them male and female.*'² It is quite clear that the narrator found nothing incongruous in the connection he established. We for our part can only presume that the perspective of his thought did not change as it developed. 'Man' created 'in the image of God' was then already, in actual fact, as we have concluded, that man and woman to whom the account later gives an assurance of the double blessing of fruitfulness and rule. 'Then God blessed them and said to

¹ 'In our likeness' is an emphatic repetition with apparently no special meaning beyond a reinforcement of the first formula 'to our image.' The expression does not aim at evoking anything with a precise ontological structure: body, soul, intellect, will, liberty, etc. Rather it tends to bring into relief the features of human beings as a whole, compared with the lower creatures of which 'man' is master, and compared with God who is their creator. It defines a situation rather than an essence. An analogous expression may be found in Ps. 8:6. Moreover the idea is the same.

² In Hebrew the etymology of the terms, which probably influenced contemporary linguistic usage, has reference to the sexually morphological differences between man and woman.

them : be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and bring it into subjection.' All this is perfectly worked out and forms one whole.

There is a shade of meaning here which should be noticed. Idiomatically, the phrase which we translate 'God blessed them and said to them' should be understood as 'God blessed them in the following words.' Hence what follows is not strictly speaking a command, as it is usually taken to be. It is above all a blessing, which is something quite different. This idea finds more ready acceptance with the realisation that a similar blessing of fruitfulness (but without mention of 'rule') has already been spoken over fish, birds and reptiles (Gen. 1:22). In fact, in the mind of the narrator the 'blessings' are exactly parallel to the creative words : 'Let there be light . . . Let there be a firmament . . .', and produce a like effect ; or if you wish, the blessings carry on the creation, passing from the plane of being to that of action. The relation of cause and effect remains the same, only its modality is changed, from the human standpoint. Having created the first man and woman in His own image, God by blessing them proclaims, equivalently, His intention of carrying on the work begun, both in them and in their descendants. This work will go on in this way, following the same lines, without alteration or interruption. The word of blessing is not less than the creative word : the image of God which was present at the beginning will also be present at the end.

It must also be emphasised that the blessing of the first man and woman is not solely a blessing of fruitfulness. This is doubtless to the fore, and it is natural in the context. But there is something more and it should not pass unnoticed : 'Bring (the earth) into subjection, and rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of the heavens and over all the beasts which crawl upon the earth.' The meaning the narrator wished to give these words of subjection imposed on the earth and of rule over the animal world, certainly bears upon human activity insofar as this carries on the creation. The prospect is vast and one may suppose that the expressions are deliberately vague. The man and woman are blessed not only in that fruitful union by which they are to fill the earth and which will give birth to the human family, but also in that union, fruitful too in its own way, by which they will *together* make the earth minister to their needs. Thus in every respect the blessing is not an individual but a common one. It is a man and woman, *by their joint activity* who will be masters of the 'house' bestowed by God on their race. In this way too the blessing appears once more as a correlative of the creation. What has been made in the image of God to occupy the earth and bring it into subjection is a man and a woman not isolated one from another but together. The context of the

thought here, for creation as for blessing, is that of marriage and the home.

The second account for its part, far from abandoning this perspective, seems rather to accentuate it by giving the creation a more domestic and intimate atmosphere. The majestic 'geography' of Eden with its spring and its four rivers does not prevent it being a garden of human proportions; we have the impression that we could make the round of all the trees in a single day. Such a 'geography' is obviously not descriptive. It might well be attributed to the poetic impressionism of the East. Nevertheless it goes without saying that it has a purpose, namely that of suggesting the ideal wealth which, in the mind of the narrator, is the sign of God's favour. It was in this flawless garden that Yahweh put 'man' to cultivate and preserve it. You remember what follows: the reflection of Yahweh that 'It is not good that man should be alone; I must make him a helper who will be suited to him'; the survey of the animals by their master, who imposes names on them and yet finds no suitable helper; the man's sleep during which Yahweh takes from him a 'rib,' out of which He shapes woman; the introduction of this woman to the man by Yahweh, and the exclamation: 'Here is the one, this time, who is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She will be called woman (*'ishah*) because she has been taken out of man (*'ish*),' with the editor's final comment: 'This is why man leaves his father and his mother, to join himself to his wife, and the two become one single flesh.'

The object of the account is so complex that in part it falls outside our subject. It cannot, moreover, be studied except through something else, through images whose associations now partly escape us. Nevertheless one thing seems certain, and from this a suitable explanation of the rest can be deduced. It is the account of a beginning: man and woman have been created by God. But the ways they have been made are distinct and separate in virtue of various circumstances, of which the principal is that man is taken from the 'dust' of the earth whereas woman is taken from a 'rib' of the man. Hence it is clear that if the basic intention of the account is directed towards the creation of man and woman, its secondary object must be to render an account, through this origin, of their mutual relations in the context of domestic life. But what special associations were, in the editor's mind, connected with man being created before woman on the one hand, and on the other with woman's being taken out of the man? It is hard to tell with any certainty. The total effect of the account suggests, however, that the editor's main idea was to ascribe to God, as to its first origin, the mysterious attraction which draws man and woman towards each other; at the same time, following

contemporary ideas, he regards it as more or less established that woman is to a certain extent dependent upon man within their domestic life. Love, anyway, could not be surrounded by a more exalted yet calm atmosphere. In order to gain a balanced appreciation of this faith and give it its due, it may perhaps be well to recall that at the time when the Genesis account was drawn up the oriental pantheon abounded in erotic legends, and that of all the races of antiquity Israel alone did not deify love. Indeed Israel does not seem even to have personified it, as, for example, she did in the case of 'Wisdom.' It was one of her noblest traits to regard love soberly as a good which man and woman held from God by their common origin.

To a great extent then the two accounts of the creation of man and woman overlap each other, although each has in part a distinct objective. Their common context is that of conjugal and domestic life. In actual fact Jewish tradition did not consider here, properly speaking, a creation of 'man,' understood as 'human being,' with the implications which our western culture might give to this expression. Jewish tradition, very organic and very concrete, was not disposed to split up man into isolated components. In its eyes 'man' was not, abstractly, a 'rational being,' but, in a much more comprehensive way, a man and woman together, in those conditions of existence determined by the complementary nature of their sex and by their effective union inside the family circle. It is 'man' thus understood whom the first account shows to us as created in the image of God, and whose love is hallowed by the second account. But in the minds of both narrators 'creation' is the inauguration of destiny. Hence in the first account we have the blessing of God pronounced over the first man and woman, and in the second account, in continuity with creation, that division between man and woman of responsibility for the human work regarding the earth which is their common inheritance and their common abode. Hence, finally, the assurance, discernible everywhere but more obvious in certain places, that such a destiny has received in its very origin a goodness against which nothing will prevail, not even the Fall: 'God saw all that He had made, and lo! it was very good' (Gen. 1:31).

The love of Yahweh and Israel It is quite clear that the prophets from Osee onward were conscious, though perhaps without reflection, of this original goodness,¹ and consequently introduced the image of

¹ This 'goodness' is not to be taken in a vaguely moral sense, as if there were question of a simple 'rightness' of things, understood in terms of human freedom. That which is 'good' in the sense of the first creation account, is whatever is beautiful to see, well ordered, permanent, regular, useful and pleasant. It is a cumulative quality which reflects the quasi total experience of creatures.

the love between Yahweh and Israel. It is an impressive reappearance, though not intentional, of the representation, in the first creation account, of man and woman created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This time, as a matter of fact, it is as if man and woman were reflecting upon God the intense light of their being, a being so often at once united and torn apart, to catch a glimpse of something of His own goodness. Many questions have been asked about the origin of this prophetic theme.¹ But they cannot be answered with certainty, for explanations are not always forthcoming. What may in a general manner be said, is that Israel, like all the ancient peoples of the East, had inherited the ways of thought which the men of prehistory had slowly drawn from domestic experience. During thousands of years man and woman, in their most intimate relations, had been the two poles of this thought. Their mutual relations within the privileged sphere of generation had little by little shaped in their minds the first traces of the notion of causality, on the admittedly limited plane of beginning and end. As the oldest legends which have come down to us bear witness, it was with this still very elementary intellectual equipment, even in the historical period, that the first paths towards the idea of God were opened up. The total result of this prolonged effort reaches us in the shape of cosmogonies, most often polytheist, and almost always comprising as a principal feature an anthropogony under divers forms. Such was the normal approach. It would not be difficult to show the active part played by this way of thought in Israel's religious consciousness until a comparatively late era; although certainly some elements of the ancient scheme became gradually fossilised in the language, in proportion as monotheism was more and more strongly established (thus, for example, the survival in Hebrew of *ba'al*: master—spouse, as a divine title cf. Os. 2:18). One may add to this the proximity felt to exist between the two realities, analogous in several respects, of alliance and marriage.² It no longer comes as a surprise then to find in prophetic tradition, and no longer merely germinating but in full flower, the image of the (conjugal) love between Yahweh and Israel.

For us at least, seeing these things at a distance it is in Osee that the theme appears for the first time (c.750 B.C.). If this circumstance

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² cf. the form of marriage contract employed at Elephantine (5th cent. B.C.): 'She is my wife and I am her husband from today, henceforth and for ever,' and the phraseology of the new alliance in Jer. 31:33 'then I shall be their God and they shall be my people' (cf. Jer. 30:22; Lev. 26:12; Os. 2:21). With regard to the marriage contracts of Elephantine, see R. Yaron, 'Aramaic Marriage Contracts from Elephantine,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* III (1958), pp. 2-4; 30-2.

contemporary ideas, he regards it as more or less established that woman is to a certain extent dependent upon man within their domestic life. Love, anyway, could not be surrounded by a more exalted yet calm atmosphere. In order to gain a balanced appreciation of this faith and give it its due, it may perhaps be well to recall that at the time when the Genesis account was drawn up the oriental pantheon abounded in erotic legends, and that of all the races of antiquity Israel alone did not deify love. Indeed Israel does not seem even to have personified it, as, for example, she did in the case of 'Wisdom.' It was one of her noblest traits to regard love soberly as a good which man and woman held from God by their common origin.

To a great extent then the two accounts of the creation of man and woman overlap each other, although each has in part a distinct objective. Their common context is that of conjugal and domestic life. In actual fact Jewish tradition did not consider here, properly speaking, a creation of 'man,' understood as 'human being,' with the implications which our western culture might give to this expression. Jewish tradition, very organic and very concrete, was not disposed to split up man into isolated components. In its eyes 'man' was not, abstractly, a 'rational being,' but, in a much more comprehensive way, a man and woman together, in those conditions of existence determined by the complementary nature of their sex and by their effective union inside the family circle. It is 'man' thus understood whom the first account shows to us as created in the image of God, and whose love is hallowed by the second account. But in the minds of both narrators 'creation' is the inauguration of destiny. Hence in the first account we have the blessing of God pronounced over the first man and woman, and in the second account, in continuity with creation, that division between man and woman of responsibility for the human work regarding the earth which is their common inheritance and their common abode. Hence, finally, the assurance, discernible everywhere but more obvious in certain places, that such a destiny has received in its very origin a goodness against which nothing will prevail, not even the Fall: 'God saw all that He had made, and lo! it was very good' (Gen. 1:31).

The love of Yahweh and Israel It is quite clear that the prophets from Osee onward were conscious, though perhaps without reflection, of this original goodness,¹ and consequently introduced the image of

¹ This 'goodness' is not to be taken in a vaguely moral sense, as if there were question of a simple 'rightness' of things, understood in terms of human freedom. That which is 'good' in the sense of the first creation account, is whatever is beautiful to see, well ordered, permanent, regular, useful and pleasant. It is a cumulative quality which reflects the quasi total experience of creatures.

the love between Yahweh and Israel. It is an impressive reappearance, though not intentional, of the representation, in the first creation account, of man and woman created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). This time, as a matter of fact, it is as if man and woman were reflecting upon God the intense light of their being, a being so often at once united and torn apart, to catch a glimpse of something of His own goodness. Many questions have been asked about the origin of this prophetic theme.¹ But they cannot be answered with certainty, for explanations are not always forthcoming. What may in a general manner be said, is that Israel, like all the ancient peoples of the East, had inherited the ways of thought which the men of prehistory had slowly drawn from domestic experience. During thousands of years man and woman, in their most intimate relations, had been the two poles of this thought. Their mutual relations within the privileged sphere of generation had little by little shaped in their minds the first traces of the notion of causality, on the admittedly limited plane of beginning and end. As the oldest legends which have come down to us bear witness, it was with this still very elementary intellectual equipment, even in the historical period, that the first paths towards the idea of God were opened up. The total result of this prolonged effort reaches us in the shape of cosmogonies, most often polytheist, and almost always comprising as a principal feature an anthropogony under divers forms. Such was the normal approach. It would not be difficult to show the active part played by this way of thought in Israel's religious consciousness until a comparatively late era; although certainly some elements of the ancient scheme became gradually fossilised in the language, in proportion as monotheism was more and more strongly established (thus, for example, the survival in Hebrew of *ba'al*: master—spouse, as a divine title cf. Os. 2:18). One may add to this the proximity felt to exist between the two realities, analogous in several respects, of alliance and marriage.² It no longer comes as a surprise then to find in prophetic tradition, and no longer merely germinating but in full flower, the image of the (conjugal) love between Yahweh and Israel.

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alone does not allow us to say that Osee was its originator, it is nevertheless an easy matter to see that those who took it up again after him (Jeremias, Deutero-Isaias, Ezechiel) have scarcely done anything but follow his example. Besides, the pattern was complete in Osee so that for our own particular point of view we may limit our remarks to him alone. To avoid confusion, it will perhaps not be amiss to stress first of all that this image of the love of Yahweh and Israel is at once loftier and more restricted than the reality of marriage on which it is based. It is in fact obvious that the prophet did not develop this theme to cast new light upon marriage, but to trace out a path, through marriage—and a marriage seriously threatened if not broken¹—towards an understanding of God's plans, which show in spite of all human erring an indestructible love. Nevertheless marriage itself was indirectly enhanced in some fashion, as if the glimpse of something of God through the sensuous medium of the flesh had in return conferred on it a certain divine grandeur. The creature is no longer the same when once God has been glimpsed through it, even if this were but in a sudden illumination of thought and consciousness. This mediatory quality lifts it once for all above itself; or rather, restores it to its true dimensions, when once it has been viewed in such a wide perspective. It is not for nothing that sometimes those things which are nearest and most familiar to us have a share in revealing our ultimate hopes. Thus marriage first served in the mind of the prophet as a help in the difficult search for God's plan for erring men; as a result it became a ready-made path which others, individually or collectively, could follow him in using.

Moreover it is important to be exact about the aspect of marriage which serves as the implicit theme in Osee's image of the love between Yahweh and Israel. It is not that of fruitfulness or generation, but an aspect which is in a sense much more radical, and which is more specifically human, namely that of love. Outside of this the image would even lose all significance. It is marriage insofar as it is love, and thus it is the yearning, in itself unlimited, of a man and a woman for each other, over and above any consideration of fruitfulness, which is spontaneously borrowed by the prophet as a means of access to the most mysterious part of Yahweh's plan for His people: that which maintains fidelity to the promise and its fulfilment in spite of the widespread flourishing of evil. In actual fact it is not of the sterility of his marriage that Osee complains. It appears that Gomer, his wife, had given him within a few years two sons and a daughter (Os. 1:3-9).

¹ An excellent review of current opinions on this point will be found in H. H. Rowley, 'The Marriage of Hosea,' in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* xxxix (1956-7), pp. 200-33.

The genius of the prophet on the contrary lay precisely in this, that he had left aside that aspect of marriage in which from the beginning of time, according to the tradition of his people, a sign of God's blessing had invariably been seen. It is rather insatiable love as such, disappointed in spite of fruitfulness, which shows him the tremendous spiritual drama of the idolatry to which his nation has become addicted. This is so true, that when the prophet, spurning despair, resolves to restore his wounded affection, it is the memory of the *espousals* which comes back to his mind, and which he sets up as an indestructible ideal for the future (2:16-22).

The Canticle of Canticles Osee had acquired a unique awareness of his union with Gomer, the daughter of Diblaïm. But in this awareness what was the essential element? It was the espousals, above and beyond the drama itself and the fruitfulness of the marriage, because they stood for love alone; and Jewish antiquity has handed down to us a remarkable witness of the unique force to be found in betrothal, as being love unadorned. This witness, of extraordinary charm and beauty, is the Canticle of Canticles. Moreover if we now turn our attention to it as we draw towards the end of this investigation we are doing no more than taking a hint from Osee himself. For it seems probable that in Osee 2:17 there is an allusion to betrothal songs parallel with, if not identical to, those we have in the Canticle: 'There, she will *reply* as in the days of her youth.' This 'reply' could not take a more apt form than that in which the Canticle clothes the expression of the betrothed girl's feelings.

For the critics the general interpretation of the poem remains doubtful. It is of course unnecessary to add that we are only concerned with the general interpretation; it would be impossible to go into the details of the text. A short time ago I proposed a simple solution to this supposedly abstruse problem. I was not so ingenuous as to think that everybody would be immediately convinced of its truth, and I venture to go back, very briefly, over a point which seems to me decisive even apart from any other consideration. In the article just referred to¹ I distinguished a 'pre-literary' stage of the Canticle, corresponding to the period during which its use for its original purpose was widespread (approximately the era of the monarchy up to the Exile), from a 'literary' stage, corresponding to the subsequent period. By this time the Canticle had become quite simply (thanks to the Wisdom writers who had first collected and then edited it) a text like other texts, having from now on an existence which was much attenuated by comparison with that which it had had before.

¹ 'Le sens du Cantique des cantiques,' *Revue biblique*, LXII (1955), pp. 197-221

I suggested at the same time that the gradual transition from Hebrew to Aramaic as the spoken language of Palestine in the Persian era had probably had something to do with this change. At any rate, if the main premise was correct, it was clear, I said, that the meaning of the Canticle should be sought first and foremost at its pre-literary stage, not, as many suppose, at the literary stage. In short, the meaning of the Canticle should be above all that which derives from its use as a song, rather than that which results from reading it as a text. This was the starting-point of my interpretation. It remained to decide what could have been the purpose which the Canticle originally fulfilled. At this point two methods of analysis seemed possible: one internal, the other external. In actual fact both converged upon the same truth: the original purpose of the Canticle had been as a betrothal song. With its lyrical form it compensated psychologically and socially for the business-like nature of the contract,¹ and was the first exchange of love between the betrothed, equivalent to a mutual promise of fidelity.

Such then must have been the general sense of the Canticle when it was taken up and edited by the Wisdom writers some time after the exile. For there is no indication—rather the contrary—that the Wisdom writers wished to modify this primitive meaning, and this is made sufficiently clear by what they added to it (8:6b-7). But if this is so it is clear that we ought to read the Canticle now, in the same way as did the Sages then, as a betrothal song. This has not been the usual attitude, for interpreters, by force of circumstances and because of certain basic assumptions, have generally read it in a prophetic setting, as an allegory or parable of the love (eschatological or otherwise) between Yahweh and Israel.² To read it in a sapiential setting

¹ cf. R. Yaron, *art. cit.*, pp. 1-39

² M. Feuillet in a note attached to one of his recent articles ('L'universalisme et l'alliance dans la religion d'Osée,' in *Bible et vie chrétienne*, xviii (1957), p. 32, note 6), puts the question: 'Does the Canticle make use of prophetic ideas or does it not?' As far as I am concerned, the answer is: No! The Canticle is confined to the betrothal theme; it shows no knowledge of the idea of the betrothal or marriage of Yahweh and Israel, which would be the prophetic idea. This is a fact, and it is easily provable if silence means anything. The onus of proof falls upon those who claim the opposite, making the dumb to speak. For it is my supposition that in Jewish antiquity you could think of betrothal without straightway implying, by allegory or parable, the transference of this universal and fundamental idea to the special case of the relation between Yahweh and Israel. The writer adds: 'Nothing that has been said to the contrary has, in my opinion, advanced by one step the understanding of the Canticle, because people have restricted themselves to general considerations without troubling to go into a detailed discussion of the text.' There must be some misunderstanding here. In any problem the most detailed solution is not necessarily the most accurate. I would even go so far as to say that in the present case, any temptation to enter too soon into detailed examination may very easily conceal a retreat from the much more serious problem raised by the text as a whole. For in such a situation detailed analysis is only possible on a basis of assumptions, and in the nature of things, with every move it sinks deeper

is simply to return to the more ancient Jewish tradition, at least up to about the first century A.D., as well as to return to the original function of the poem as a betrothal song. In fact, the prophetic reading of the Canticle, as a figure of the love between Yahweh and Israel, does not appear in tradition until a relatively late date (the second century A.D.), when, because of the remoteness from its original purpose, the Canticle was actually no more than a text, handed over defenceless to the imagination and preconceived ideas of the erudite. In this way it was finally separated, both among Jews and Christians, from that sapiential tradition which had ensured its survival in the first place. This could happen because by the second century A.D. the sapiential tradition was practically dead. The only thing remaining, and that in a predominantly Pharisaic form, was the tradition of the Law and the Prophets. This tradition, by the familiar procedure of allegory, took to itself the whole interpretation of the Canticle. But it was a misinterpretation, and it is fairly easy to see how this misinterpretation was accepted. This line of reasoning, after further time to consider it, still seems to me to be sound. I should merely like to support it by making an observation which as far as I know has not previously been expressed by anybody else.

I refer to the title 'Canticle of Canticles' (Hebrew : *shîr ha-shîrîm*), to which insufficient attention has been paid. This title can hardly be the one under which the poem was composed. It is an appreciative title : 'The most beautiful of songs,' which one hesitates to attribute to an author, but which, on the contrary, it would not be hard to imagine coming from the pen of an editor. The latter could, without vanity or presumption, write over the poem : Canticle of Canticles. It was a name which bore witness to the recognised merit of the composition, and to the affection for it, bred of long use or a long tradition. Canticle of Canticles is not the author's name for it, but that given it by an editor.¹

But if Canticle of Canticles is the editor's name for it, the question immediately arises as to what the poem was previously called. If an

¹ Within these limits this fact is recognised by a fair number of exegetes : cf. a recent work, R. Gordis, *The Song of Songs*, New York 1954, p. 78.

into erroneous details. So it is with the assumptions themselves that one must quarrel. The detail will fill itself in later quite naturally, without any need for force to make it fit a system. As regards seeing in love 'an essentially sacred character,' this was always foreign to the thought of the prophets as it was to that of the Canticle of Canticles. Religious ethnology, moreover, proves abundantly that each time the sacred has been grafted on to love, it has risked degeneration into superstition (religious prostitution, innumerable fecundity rites, etc.). The prophets of Israel were well aware of this because they had examples of it before their very eyes. And what they knew did not exactly incline them to find in love 'an essentially sacred character.' It was enough for them that love was 'blessed' by its connection with creation.

original name could be found, it goes without saying that it would be of exceptional value in establishing the general meaning which the song must have had in its original context. Now this pre-literary title of the poem, in my opinion, is still in existence. Since in fact it is a song which is under discussion, it is natural to suppose that this song must have been known by a name which indicated the theme both of the music and the words. But in any literature or folklore in the world, such titles are only conceivable as being borrowed in some way from the very songs to which they are applied. Normally the first line or hemistich of the composition (a verse or refrain) is chosen. We ourselves retain this same practice, and examples of it are far too numerous to choose from. This practice of naming pieces according to melody and theme was, needless to say, perfectly well known to Jewish antiquity. The Psalter still contains some examples: Ps. 22, 'Concerning: The doe at early dawn'; 56, 'Concerning: The dumb dove of far-off gods'; 57-9, 75, 'Do not destroy,' to quote only the most certain cases of this.¹

If we bear this in mind, it suffices to look at the beginning of the Canticle to recognise there a literary form similar to that which one might have expected. Everybody has noticed that the first hemistich, whilst being in harmony with the general tone of the poem, nevertheless has no close textual connection with what follows. After 'May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth,' the second hemistich carries on in the second person without any transition. The temptation for critics has naturally been, after supposing every possible meaning for this isolated hemistich, to suggest textual emendations, all equally unsatisfactory.² But is it in fact necessary to make any correction? The most natural supposition in such a case is rather that we have here the designation under which a certain melody was known in antiquity, this designation having been preserved by the Wisdom writers who edited the ancient betrothal song after the exile. Thus Canticle of Canticles would be the name given to it by the editors simply to express their esteem when, belatedly, it became part of that literary treasure we know as the Wisdom writings. And so 'May he kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' is, on this supposition, a name given to music and words, a name by which the song was called as long as it remained in current use and as long as it accompanied ancient Jewish marriage celebrations, from the beginning of the monarchical period at the very least right up to the Persian era. This hypothesis has in

¹ cf. R. Tournay, *Les Psaumes (Bible de Jérusalem)*, Paris 1950, pp. 9-10; E. Gerson-Kiwi, 'Musique,' in *Dictionnaire de la Bible (Suppl.)*, v, coll. 1437-8

² cf. the review of the main opinions in P. Jouon, *Le Cantique des cantiques*, Paris 1909, pp. 125-7; D. Buzy, *Le Cantique des cantiques (La Sainte Bible VI)*, pp. 297-8; the apparatus of *Biblia Hebraica* (Kittel-Kahle), 3rd ed., in *loc.*

its favour the fact that it is quite obvious when once it is considered, and that, without strain, it accounts for all the elements of the problem.¹

It may, as I believe, become accepted, and if so it supplies at the same time a perfectly plain indication of the general sense of the Canticle as it was originally used. This wonderful song which the Wisdom writers have preserved for us with the literary title of Canticle of Canticles was first of all, if you like, a 'Kissing song for the betrothed.' So by a new and more direct way we arrive at a general interpretation of the poem which already seems to commend itself sufficiently on other grounds. The Canticle is a nuptial song whose appropriate religious values must be looked for within the implied framework, namely the very profound regard which Israel had for the union of man and woman. Thus we come once more to our starting-point, the creation stories. What has already been said about these will suffice to give us an understanding of the greatness of the Canticle of Canticles. It must have been virtually the equal of the exaltation which, in the mind of the editor of the Genesis account, had marked *for ever* the first meeting of the first man and woman: 'Yahweh God fashioned into woman the rib which He had taken from the man. He brought her before the man, and the man cried out: this time, it is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, because she has been taken from man! This is why man leaves his mother and father and joins himself to his wife, and they become one single flesh' (Gen. 2:23-4). Someone else, who had doubtless understood, was to add later after quoting part of this text, and taking up once more the profound inspiration of Osee for the benefit of the Gospel: 'This mystery is great: I mean with regard to Christ and the Church' (Eph. 5:32).

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¹ The initial *kî* of the second hemistich (1:2) does not offer any real difficulty for this explanation. The syntactical value of this *kî* is reduced to the minimum in any hypothesis which does not arbitrarily correct the text of the first hemistich. It is a usage which may be likened to the recitative *kî*, to introduce the whole of the succeeding development. The particle is, however, a little stronger than our colon; it is a reinforced colon, which may quite well be translated as 'Yes, . . .' (cf. 8:6b for another usage of the same sort to introduce a reflection of the editor: 'For (yes) love is as strong as death,' etc.). It is, moreover, probable that this *kî* is proper to the 'literary' period of the Canticle, and must have been added for purposes of 'reading'; without doubt it had less reason for appearing in the song. This observation finds support too in the obvious fact that parallelism only becomes evident from the second hemistich onwards. In the period of its pre-literary use this would serve the poem as both a musical and thematic archetype. The musical import of this archetype, it goes without saying, is irretrievably lost, but its thematic value remains. It fixes the general sense of the poem. This sense excludes any parabolic or allegorical purpose. With its melody and (principal) theme thus determined by the title, the Canticle cannot be anything but a nuptial song. It is the 'Song of the kiss of the betrothed.'