The Biblical Basis of Marriage

Covenantal Marriage in the Hebrew Bible
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Summary

Broadly understood, the purpose of covenantal marriage, as described in both the biblical witness and extra-biblical sources, was to civilize and sustain human societies. To this end, the marriage covenant[i] accomplished two purposes: First, the marriage covenant served as the mechanism by which families of geographically, culturally, and ethnically diverse backgrounds formed alliances with one another. More specifically, the marriage covenants of the Ancient Near East (ANE) formed the basis of civil society – that is, a society constrained by rules and traditions that served to preserve and strengthen intertribal relationships. Second, the marriage covenant expressed, fostered, and protected a culture's interest in procreation[ii]. Thus, the marriage covenant tempered tribal passions while fostering relationships that facilitated the preservation of cultural traditions across the generations.

Covenantal marriage was common among all the cultures of the ANE. Unique to the ancient Hebrews, however, was the participation of their deity (Elohim[1]).

Introduction

In Genesis 1:27-28 God establishes procreation as the means by which mankind is to rule over His creation – a sort of "*might makes right*" ethic. Then, in Genesis 2:24 a set of stipulations for the marriage covenant is revealed, three of which were unique among marriage covenants of the ANE. In these two verses lie the scriptural basis for the Judeo-Christian understanding of marriage – its purpose and marital ethics.

But first some background.

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[1] *Elohim* is the Hebrew transliteration of one of the names of God in the Hebrew Bible.

Marriage, as understood and practiced today, is far different than that practiced during biblical times. In the ANE, the union of a man and a woman was instantiated by, and formalized with a covenant agreement between families, tribes of families, or kingdoms in which each participant had a stake in the well-being of the marriage, not just the bride and groom. Known as the marriage covenant, this covenant was largely a matter of public interest because its covenantal restrictions served to order the broader society toward its purposes.

To appreciate the public nature of a biblical marriage in the ANE, consider the marriage ceremony. Surprisingly, the bride and groom were not the centerpiece of the celebration. Yes, the bride and groom stood before an altar representing theological and/or civic authority, but the focus was on the two patriarchs – the fathers of the bride and groom – shaking hands, kissing each other on the cheek, and embracing warmly after which they would leave the compound and, together, build a monument to their new alliance[2].

Marriage Vocabulary in the Old Testament

Exploring how the ancient Hebrews expressed their concept of marriage is illuminating. We cannot do this by examining the marriage vocabulary used in modern English Bibles because the words '*marriage'* or '*marry'*, '*husband'* and '*wife'*, and '*divorce'* were not part of the biblical vocabulary. Simply put, the ancient Hebrews did not have the marriage vocabulary we have today. For example, the NRS translates the last clause of Genesis 34:8 as

> *Please give her to him in marriage.*

The Hebrew of this clause literally reads,

> *Give her, please, to-him for-a-woman*

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[2] c.f., Gen 31:44-47, 1 Kings 9:16

Similarly, in Genesis 28:1, the NRS translates the Hebrew as

"You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women."

But the Hebrew translates literally as

"Not shall-you-take a-woman from-the-daughters-of Canaan."

'Marriage' as understood in the Hebrew of the Bible is expressed in terms of *give* and *take*. Both brides and husbands are given or taken. The Hebrew words we translate as '*husband'* and '*wife'* are simply the words for man (*ish*) and woman (*ishah*) respectively. Unlike English, there are no words that can be explicitly translated as 'husband' or 'spouse'[3] except by context.

The Scriptural Basis for Marriage

Covenantal marriage was widely practiced by most (all?) cultures in the ANE. Specifically, there is abundant archeological evidence that covenantal marriage was an institution whose principal purpose was to express and protect society's interest in fostering a culture in which families, and the larger society, could flourish. The ancient Hebrews understood that covenantal marriage was a non-biblical tradition but at the same time believed that its version of the covenant had been instituted by God. Put another way, the general concept of marriage – a man and one or more women bound in a lifelong relationship within the cultural norms of a tribe or larger social organization – was universal around the world and the cultures of the ANE were no different.

The principle difference – unique to the ancient Hebrews – was that God had added certain stipulations to the covenant not found in other ANE cultures. As far as I have been able to determine, the other cultures surrounding the ancient Hebrews normally did not incorporate the requirements of their gods into the covenantal agreement.

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[3] However, there is the concept of a woman 'reserved' to a son, i.e., a future daughter-in-law, kallah

It is to the scriptural basis for the biblical-version of the marriage covenant we now turn. To this end, of the many verses in the Bible that deal with marriage, there are two from which the covenantal rules are primarily derived: Genesis 1:27-28 and Genesis 2:24.

Genesis 1:27-28 – Procreation and Gender Equality

The importance of human procreation as the divine goal of dominion over God's creation underpins these two theologically important verses. Ironically, nothing of marriage is mentioned in these two verses. Instead, the idea of gender and sexual activity as necessary to the exercise of dominion over God's kingdom is emphasized – strongly so. Here are the two verses in question (my translation):

> **27**ic*So Elohim created mankind to be His image.*
>   *To be the image of Elohim He created it.*
>   *Male and female He created them.*
>
> **28***Then Elohim blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, And fill the earth that you may subjugate it; but over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth you shall rule."*

A careful reading of the first three lines reveals two surprising truths. First, the collective noun, 'mankind', is the image of God, not the individual male and female persons of which mankind is composed. This is surprising because Judeo-Christian doctrine holds that each individual, both male and female, bear the image of God[iii]. Nevertheless, that is not how the text reads. I'll explain the translation below (it's fairly simple), but the significance of this idea – that the collective bears the divine image – is profoundly significant to the understanding of the marriage covenant. But this won't become clear until the discussion below of Genesis 2:24 (HINT: keep the phrase "*one flesh*" in mind).

The second revelation is that no priority is given to either the male or the female gender. In verse 1:28, both are given dominion over God's creation unequivocally.

So, now let's move to a more detailed exegesis of 1:26. The key to understanding this interpretation is the antecedent of the pronoun 'it'. In this verse, 'it', a singular pronoun, refers to 'mankind', a singular (but collective) noun.

And God created mankind as His image; as an image of God He created it.

It might be clearer if we rewrote this verse without the pronoun:

And God created mankind as His image; as an image of God He created mankind.

This verse states that the collective noun, mankind, bears the image of God. Upon reflection, this is not as absurd as it may seem. For example, a flock of geese flying south for the winter might form the image of a 'V'. In the picture above, the flock bears the image of the 'V', not any individual goose.

Moving on to verse 1:28 we learn that males and females are to procreate ("be fruitful") in order that they may subdue and rule over God's creation.

Male and female He created them. And He blessed them… and he said to the male and the female[4], "procreate[5]…that you may subjugate [the earth] and rule over [all living things]"

There are three important ideas in this verse. The first is the blessing of the genders, male and female, not mankind. The second is that procreation is the means

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[4] It's both interesting and theologically significant that God divides mankind into male (*zakar*) and female (*neqebah*), not man (*ish*) and woman (*ishah*). The Bible clearly has procreation in view as a necessary condition for dominion over creation, but not necessarily marriage.
[5] Literally, "be fruitful".

by which God intends for mankind to exercise dominion – by sheer force of numbers. And the third, both genders are equally responsible for fulfilling God's command.

And He blessed them: there are two points to be made here. First, it is the genders – the male and the female - that are blessed. He does not bless 'mankind', the collective. Second, the Hebrew concept of blessing has a wide semantic range, but in this case (as in most) blessing acts as opposite of a curse[6]. Thus, while a curse is a bond restricting freedom, a blessing releases all bonds freeing the previously 'cursed' individual to pursue their aims. In verse 28, God gives the male and female genders the liberty (and obligation) to engage in sexual activity in order to fulfill their role as God's vice regent over creation.

Genesis 2:24 – Covenantal Marriage

Taken on its own, verse 28 would seem to advocate sexual license. Surely there is more here and this is where covenantal marriage comes into play. Biblically understood, covenantal marriage is an institution that facilitates and protects civil society and orders human procreation towards God's ends – dominion over God's creation. Human fulfillment, whether emotional or erotic, is nowhere contemplated in the biblical covenant.

In its simplest form, marriage civilizes sexual activity as a necessary but insufficient condition for human flourishing. Insufficient because, in the absence of such a covenant, sexual activity serves largely private, personal desires, not societal ends[iv]. But, if not erotic or emotional fulfillment, what else is there? To answer this question we turn to Genesis 2:24:

> *To this end, a man will leave his father and his mother and will stand by[v] his wife. And they will be as one flesh.*

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[6] Another very common meaning of 'blessing' is thanks as in blessing God for His providence.

This verse is one of the most theologically rich (and dense) verses in the Bible and will require some serious unpacking. When all is said and done, verse 2:24 provides the framework within which the two genders, blessed in verse 1:28, are to channel their sexual activity. In this verse, we learn that God reveals how best to order one's married life:

The phrase "one flesh" is key because, as most scholars now believe, these two words constitute a metaphorical expression symbolizing mankind as the recreation of the image of God described in Genesis 1:27[vi]. To illustrate this, we can replace the phrase "*one flesh*" in this verse with the phrase "*as the image of God*" from Genesis 1:27:

> *To this end, a man will leave his father and his*
> *mother and will stand by his wife. And they will*
> *become as the image of God.*

To reiterate, "*one flesh*" symbolizes the reunification[vii] of male and female through the act of sexual intercourse, the results of which can be the creation of a human being. There is some support for the notion that "*one flesh*" might also refer to the child produced by the marriage but the support is biological, not biblical[viii].

Knowing that "*one flesh*" is the recreation of God's image, we move on to the rest of the passage, a careful reading of which reveals that God establishes three stipulations that are to constitute a *betrothal* covenantal marriage:

1. The union is to be between complementary genders (male, female)[ix].
2. The male participant is to be independent of his parents.
3. The man is to be loyal to the woman no matter what the circumstances[x].

Note that the first of these restricts the union to the complementary genders. The second mandates that the male must be self-supporting. Moreover, this criterion also requires that the male must be able to support both himself and his wife (and

any children they may have). Finally, the male must be unswervingly faithful in his support of the female[7].

These stipulations outline God's view of the rules and obligations by which the marriage partners are to live. Because these covenants apply only to the marriage partners we should view them as a betrothal covenant subordinate to and part of a formal marriage covenant instituted between the parents of the bride and groom. In its biblical context, the formal marriage covenant (the rules and obligations between the families) coupled with the betrothal covenant (verse 2:24) provide the optimal environment for mankind's flourishing – a committed husband with the ability and determination to support and protect his wife and children supported and upheld by the betrothed's families.

The formal covenant, then, is not unlike a treaty between two otherwise competing nations. Unlike today's view of marriage, the stakeholders in the biblical version of a covenantal marriage were not restricted to the husband and wife. The Society in which the betrothed lived was keenly interested in the preservation of the family structure.

Appendix

In this appendix I deal with some of the more technical aspects of the translation.

Translation of Genesis 1:27-28

In Genesis 1:27-28, the text reveals that God views men and women as mankind's procreative constituents. The singular, collective noun, mankind constitutes the image of God, not the human individual. For example, suppose you looked up into the sky and saw a flock of geese flying in an arrow formation. You might say to your children, "*Look, that flock of geese looks just like an arrow.*" So,

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[7] Interestingly, a reciprocal obligation for the woman is nowhere to be found.

while the flock forms the image of an arrow, any individual bird does not. This, as we shall see, has important theological ramifications for the meaning of marriage.

Now, let's turn back to the Hebrew text: Here is a literal translation of 1:27 - 28b:

> *And-created[8]God the-mankind as-His-image as-an-image-of God He-created it. Male and-female He-had-created them. And-He-blessed them and-He-said to-them bear fruit…*

In the first line, the word 'it', is a third-person singular object pronoun whose antecedent is the singular noun, 'mankind'. Likewise, in the second and third lines, the antecedents of the pronoun, 'them' – a third person plural object pronoun – are the male and female human beings. By substituting the nouns referenced by these two pronouns, the text becomes less ambiguous. In the first clause, God creates what is called *the-mankind*. The second clause tells us one of two things: first, that the male and female genders were created independently of the creation of mankind, presumably before the creation of the-mankind. In other words, God looked upon the male and female humans and made them into the collective called the-mankind.

> *And God created the-**mankind** as His image. As an image of God He created the- **mankind**. **Male** and **female** He created **them**. Then God blessed the **male** and the **female** … and He said to the **male** and the **female**, procreate…*

the-mankind: The Hebrew text uses the definite article – *the* – as in the-mankind (*haadam* not *adam*). This serves to emphasize that the author has in view mankind as a definite, singular, collective noun – like 'the herd' of cattle or 'the school' of fish. Through the author, God reveals that mankind bears the image of God. As constituents of mankind, men and woman form the image of God in the same way that the individuals of a flock of geese might form the image of a "v".

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[8] Hebrew words often translate to multiple words in English (or even short phrases). I represent this by hyphenating the English words that are translated from a single Hebrew word. For example, the first Hebrew word in 1:26 is *vayyivra*, a Hebrew word which is literally translated into three English words, *and-he-created*.

male and female: The author could have described mankind in any number of ways. For example, he could have written *"Black, white, yellow, and red He created them..."*, or *"Old and young He created them..."*. Of all the myriad ways human beings can be categorized, God chose <u>gender</u> ostensibly to emphasize the importance of human sexual nature for God's stated purpose – to create a sufficiently large population to exercise dominion over His creation.

bear fruit: Is a figure of speech meaning procreate. However, procreation is much more than creating a human infant. Procreation certainly incorporates the processes of intercourse, conception, and birth; but also the nurturing and teaching that bring a child to adulthood. Just as fruit must be allowed to ripen into maturity, so must a human child be protected, taught, and nurtured.

Translation of Genesis 2:24

This verse reveals that sexual relations between a man and a woman, when conducted under the auspices of a covenantal union recreate the image of God. Again, let's explore what the phrase "image of God" meant in its ancient context. To do this, an analogy may be useful. Suppose we had created two new buildings as copies (or images) of the Twin Towers of New York destroyed in the 9/11 attack on the U.S. Further, suppose we wanted to emphasize the important role of the new buildings' structural components necessary to achieve just the right image. Using a biblical literary device called a chiasm[22], we might write the story this way. Speaking of the original skyscraper, we write

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And we built the new skyscraper as its image. As its
image we built the new skyscraper. Steel and concrete
we created them. Then, we honored the steel and
concrete and said to them, "be strong and
supportive"...
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The repetitive, chiastic structure of the first two lines emphasizes that the image of the skyscraper, not its individual components, is in view. In the next two lines, however, we learn that achievement of such an image requires steel and

concrete. Steel and concrete are necessary for creation of the image of the [original] skyscraper. In the same way, male and female are necessary for mankind to recreate the image of their creator God.

With this in mind, let's turn to Genesis 2:24. There is much to unpack in this verse, but the idea of husband and wife as "one flesh" (*ləvasar echad*) suggests that '*oneness*' is the end goal of marriage. Again, we start with the literal, word-for-word translation:

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To-this-end a-man-will-leave his-father and-his-mother
and-stand-by with-his-wife and- they [will be] as-
flesh one
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Put into more conventional English,

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Thus, a man will leave his father and his mother and
stand by his wife. And they [will be] as one flesh.
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Thus: The Hebrew term, *al-ken*, here translated as 'thus' is a common formula for introducing an etiological explanation. In this case, the question to be answered is why does the husband separate from his parents in order to join with his wife? The etiological explanation is metaphorical and refers to the previous verse in which the author explains that the woman was made out of the side of the man. The desire of the man for the woman is the desire for reunification.

will leave: Ancient Israelite society was patrilocal, meaning that when man took a wife he would normally continue to live with his parents, but would be independent of them. In this sense, the verb 'leave' connotes independence, not proximity.

 One Flesh: Conception is clearly in view, but not as some have commented, marital monogamy[9]. The Hebrew from which this phrase is translated can, as numerous scholars have commented, refer not only to the physical aspects of

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[9] See (Westermann, 1984) p. 233.

marriage, but also to the symbolic reunification of mankind from its complementary genders[10].

Here the author expresses a figurative idea suggesting that the married couple represents mankind and, therefore, the image of God. This analogy tells us that just as God created mankind for a purpose larger than mere existence, so the married couple creates a child for reasons other than biological. The new child is to take part in humanity's rule over God's creation.

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[10] (Sarna 1989) p 23

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[i] In general, a covenant is a form of contractual agreement in which each party is to engage in or refrain from specific actions. Many covenants in the ANE took the form of a suzerainty in which one of the parties is superior in status or power to the other. Such covenants are often one-sided in that the more powerful party dictates the terms of the covenant. A biblical covenant in the Hebrew Bible is an agreement between equals and not a suzerainty. Moreover, the biblical marriage covenant is distinct from the pagan covenants in that a religious deity is viewed as a party to the agreement. (Instone-Brewer 2002) Kindle location 48-239.

[ii] It is a mistake to understand procreation as limited to sexual intercourse resulting in conception. In the ANE, and especially among the those cultures with established marriage covenants, procreation includes all activities necessary to produce and nurture the human child into adulthood. Procreation, in every sense of the word, was the process upon which civilization rested and was sustained

[iii] Note, however, that in Genesis 5:3 we learn that Seth was born in the image and likeness of his father, Adam. Unlike 1:27 in which the divine image is borne by the collective mankind, in verse 5:3, a single individual bears an image.

[iv] As an aside, the argument for gay marriage is justified on the legitimate needs for love, companionship, security, intimacy. Thus, supporters of gay marriage argue correctly that marriage has become a private institution in which society has little or no stake. This is counter to the biblical witness in which marriage is a public institution that forms the basis for human society

[v] Often translated as 'cling' or 'cleave', the Hebrew word, *davaq*, is probably better translated in this verse as "be loyal to" or "be faithful to" (c.f., the loyalty of David's soldiers (2 Sam 20:2), the loyalty of the Israelites to God (Deut 10:20, 11:22, 13:4, 30:21; Josh 22:5, 23:8). I chose "stand by" because this phrase seems to capture the sense of what God requires of the man. For the man to standby the woman through thick and thin is clearly God's expectation. The Greek Septuagint, translated from the ancient Hebrew sources is even more explicit. Here, the Hebrew word *davaq* is translated into Greek using προσκολληθήσεται (*prokolathasetai*) meaning "faithful devotion"

[vi] The term "one flesh" (*ləvasar echad*) has been taken by many scholars (esp. Sarna and Friedman) to mean that sexual intercourse, performed within the marriage covenant, symbolizes the figurative reconstitution of mankind (*haadam*), i.e., the image of God (Gen 1:27). Note; unless experienced

within the context of marriage, sexual intercourse is always viewed in the Bible as base and animal-like (Sarna 1989), p 23.

[vii] In the previous verse (2:23), the predicate condition was established – that the woman is apart from, but complementary to, the man and that they were, at one time unified – which is subsequently satisfied in this verse, 2:24. Of course, this is to be read figuratively

[viii] An argument in favor of this view is biological. In the first five days following fertilization, the nascent embryo is a sexually undifferentiated being just like *haadam* (the-mankind) in verse 1:27. Of course, the ancient Hebrews knew nothing of the biological basis of sexual differentiation; but we do today and it is remarkable that the metaphorical understanding of this argument exactly expresses the literal truth of developmental biology.

[ix] In Matthew 19:3-7, we learn that Jesus narrows this particular requirement even further by ruling that covenantal marriage may only occur between _one_ person of each gender. As an aside to Jesus's teaching, I would note that nowhere in the Torah is divorce condemned. Indeed, Abraham divorced his wife Hagar, the slave, and the text suggests that God approved (Gen 21:12). (see the book by Instone-Brewer 2002. Kindle location 271).

[x] This is an important distinction for two reasons. First, in biblical days, if a man failed to live up to this obligation, or worse, deserted his wife, she had little choice but to turn to prostitution, or die. Thus, God placed the emphasis for commitment, loyalty, and responsibility with the provider husband not the woman. Even if the couple separated, as were Abraham and Sarah at the time of her death, the husband was still required to provide complete support for her (Genesis 23:1-2). Second, these criteria would seem to preclude casual, sexual relationships as they do not rise to the level of God's ethical demands.