



Women in the Bible

Theme: Biblical Marriage

Deuteronomy 21:15-17, Deuteronomy 24, 1 Corinthians 7

Today, when someone invokes the idea of “biblical marriage,” they are usually referring to the marriage of a man and a woman, who will hopefully have some children and maybe a dog. The problem with the idea of “biblical marriage” comes when we moralize a single model of marriage. The marital arrangements in the Bible do not, themselves, prescribe what anyone *should* do; they are practical matters of fact.

Scripture puts forth many different models of marriage. If the creation story of man and woman in the Garden of Eden was meant as a template, it was not very effective because almost all the stories afterward undermine it. Heterosexual monogamy is not the norm in either the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament. The figures in these stories had different goals for marriage than we might today.

Marriage in the Hebrew Bible

In the marriage stories we studied earlier in this course, we have seen that marriage in the Hebrew Bible is not the formalization of a romantic relationship. Rather, it is a brokered agreement between families for what they hope will be a fruitful domestic and economic union. The father has the power to determine marital matches and thereby to control the family line.

Returning to the story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis 16, we see an early example of this value in action. The most important goal for Sarah and Abraham’s marriage is that Abraham have a son. This is far more important to them than monogamy. In fact, the story makes no mention of monogamy as a value. Thus, this “biblical marriage” is between a man, a woman, and the woman’s enslaved servant.

With Tamar in Genesis 38, we saw a completely different model of marriage in terms of its shape, but the values were the same. Er dies before he and Tamar can have a child. The most important goal of the story becomes producing a male heir for Er. After all, as the eldest son, Er is the last generation in his family’s line of descent. This kind of “biblical marriage” is, ideally, between a (dead) man, a woman, and however many of the man’s brothers are necessary to produce a son. In Tamar’s story, the formula is even stranger: a (dead) man, a woman, and the dead man’s father.

True, there is romance in certain biblical stories. Dr. Lin reminds us, though, that the romance is always about chastity (on the part of the woman, not the man), which goes back to preserving a pure line. The numbers of people in the marriage ecosystem and their relationships can be quite different, but the goal is always the same: keep the family going through the production of sons.

New Testament

Some may be surprised to learn that ancient Christians would not have understood the idea of having a wedding in a church. Marriage and religion were interrelated only in how they directed your behavior; the actual wedding ceremony had nothing to do with the Church. Weddings were civic affairs in the Greco-Roman world until the medieval period at the earliest. Marriage did not formally become a sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church until the Council of Trent in 1563.

Like the figures in the Hebrew Bible, people in the Greco Roman world wanted to make sure that their lineage was preserved. Since only males could inherit property, male heirs were crucial to preserving a family through the generations.

The apostle Paul, who wrote so many letters in the New Testament and to whom many others are attributed, was Jewish, but he espoused a Greco Roman understanding of sexuality. Passions like anger and sexuality were aspects of oneself to be mastered, not something one should ever give in to.

With this in mind, Paul's advice to the Corinthians becomes clearer: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion" (1 Cor 7:8-9). Dr. Lin says that in this way, marriage for Paul is like a haircut in that it tends to a periodic need. Marriage helps exorcise passion in a safe way.

At the same time, marriage can be distracting. People become preoccupied with sex or with the needs of their spouse. Paul's advice comes in the context of his expectations of Jesus' prompt return. Why bother with marriage when "the present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31)? It will only take away from the urgent task of prayer and caring for one another as a communal whole. Marriage, for Paul's context, should be unnecessary for the majority of people.

As for Paul's beautiful "Love is patient; love is kind" passage: he is not teaching the Corinthians about romantic love (1 Cor 13:4-13). Rather, he is teaching them how to order their communal life, especially in the context of each person's spiritual gifts. Paul believes in the deep love of God: both our love for God and God's love for us. But Paul is not interested in the distractions and potential passions of romantic love.

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