

Genesis 2:24 and the New Covenant: A Profound Mystery

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Abstract

Ephesians 5:31–32 articulates the root metaphor of New Testament marital imagery. The profound mystery is that the “one flesh” marital affinity union of Genesis 2:24 is how the new covenant fulfills the Abrahamic promise and brings the elect of “all the nations” into union with Christ. Thus, a *sensus plenior* is read into Genesis 2:24 that foreshadows redemptive history.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:31–32 ESV)

I. *Metaphoric Structure Mapping*

A metaphor is when A is declared to be B when it is not literally true. A New Testament example is Jesus’s claim recorded in John’s Gospel, “I am the door” (John 10:9). George Lakoff and Mark Johnson say, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of

another.”¹ George Kennedy believes that metaphor is the “greatest resource for the forceful expression of original thought,” and George Caird that “All, or almost all, of the language used by the Bible to refer to God is metaphor” and that comparison “comprises ... almost all the language of theology.”²

Aristotle is believed to have been the first to recognize that metaphors were a cognitive linguistic instrument, but his insights were not revisited until I. A. Richards first delineated the “tenor” and “vehicle” of the metaphor;³ the vehicle “carries over” characteristics (hence *metapherō*, from the Greek “to carry over”) to the tenor (from the Latin *tenere* “to hold”). Thus, in “I am the door,” the door is the vehicle that carries over characteristics to Jesus, the tenor, the complete statement forming the metaphor. Although not literally true, a metaphor seeks to convey a truth, often such being left to the reader to surmise.

Metaphor theory has previously focused on these “pair-wise bindings” (where A is said “to be” B), but since the 1970s the exploration of large-scale metaphors has emerged as a distinct interdisciplinary field of study.⁴ This is where an initial metaphoric statement (the pair-wise “A is B”) can create a new area of understanding, a new conceptual domain. Linguists tend to refer to such metaphors as structure-mapping, and rather than employing the terms vehicle and tenor, speak of a source domain and a target domain.⁵

An example of a large-scale structural metaphor is found in Psalm 23, where the statement, “The Lord is my shepherd” forms what is called a *root metaphor*—a metaphoric statement that opens a new area of understanding, in this case, that God is like a shepherd to his people.⁶ This can

¹ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

² George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 26; George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 18, 144.

³ Mary Gerhart and Allan Melvin Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984), 97–101; I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), 96–97.

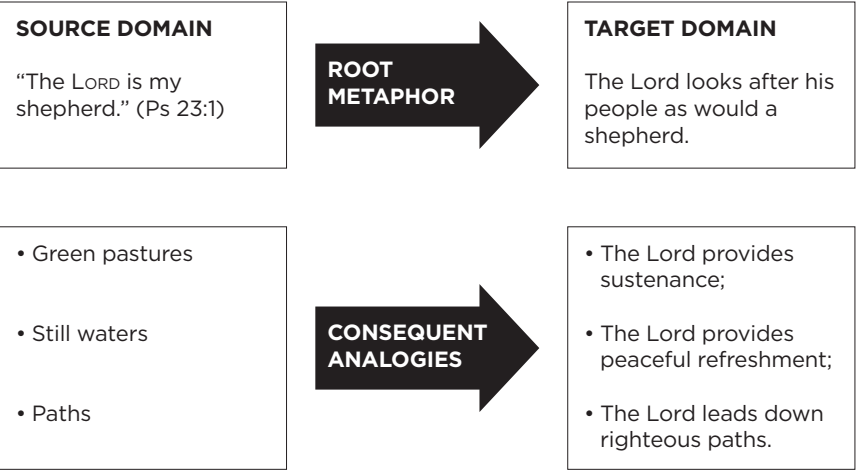
⁴ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, “Rethinking Metaphor,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 53; Robert Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God: Theology after Cognitive Linguistics*, SPT 54 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 10–11.

⁵ Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle, “Metaphor as Structure-Mapping,” in Gibbs, *Cambridge Handbook*, 109.

⁶ “Root metaphors ... have the ability to engender conceptual diversity ... an unlimited number of potential interpretations at a conceptual level. ... They are the dominant metaphors capable of both engendering and organizing a network.” Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 64.

be diagrammatically imagined like this:

The LORD Is My Shepherd



This root metaphor, THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, allows the Psalmist to exploit the new conceptual domain with consequent metaphoric expressions. For example, “he makes me lie down by green pastures ... your rod and staff they comfort me.” These are not new metaphors but rather analogies that can be seen across the two domains, or as Dedre Gentner and Brian Bowdle see it, “once the alignment is made, further candidate inferences are spontaneously projected from base to target.”⁷

There is now a rapidly expanding body of literature applying structure-mapping principles in a wide range of academic disciplines.⁸ However, Robert Masson’s perception is that

recent developments in understanding ... [in] the interdisciplinary field of cognitive linguistics provide fresh ground for rethinking how God and religious beliefs are conceptualized. ... These challenges of cognitive linguistics to standard accounts of metaphor and figurative language have not been seriously addressed in theology and religious studies.⁹

⁷ Gentner and Bowdle, “Metaphor,” 109–10; for discussion of metaphoric expressions, see Masson, *Without Metaphor*, 13–14.

⁸ Gibbs, *Cambridge Handbook*, 5.

⁹ Masson, *Without Metaphor*, 4, 16.

His observation appears to be supported by the fact that *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* has twenty-eight articles from “distinguished scholars from different academic fields” ranging through science, law, mathematics, psychoanalysis, music, and art, but theology is not represented.¹⁰

II. *The Genesis 2:24 One-Flesh Union*

It is to be argued in this article that Ephesians 5:31–32 articulates the root metaphor of the New Testament marital imagery: GENESIS 2:24 IS CHRIST AND THE CHURCH. To understand that imagery, and the “profound mystery,” it is necessary to understand the meaning of Genesis 2:24.

1. *Genesis 2:23 and Genesis 2:24 Compared*

[23] Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” [24] Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Gen 2)

In verse 23, it seems that Adam is expressing satisfaction that—after being presented with all the animals, and yet still not finding a suitable helper (vv. 18–20)—he at last has another human with whom he can relate (vv. 21–23). But in the expression “This at last (זֶאת הַפֶּעַם [*zo’th happa’am*]) is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” Gary Anderson sees the use of the article הַ (*h*; which has the force of a demonstrative pronoun) as significant, since another demonstrative pronoun זאת (*zo’th*; “this”) is also appended to the phrase, emphasizing the uniqueness of the occasion. He states: “Targum Neophyti and Ps-Jonathan clarify what is so emphatically important and novel about this occasion. ‘This time *and never again will a woman be created from a man as this one was created from me*’ [italics = Midrashic explanation].” Anderson goes on to cite the Abot de Rabbi Nathan, which states, “This one time God acted as groomsman for Adam; from now on he must get one himself.”¹¹ This view is strengthened when it is considered that the “therefore” (*ken*) at the opening of verse 24 could equally validly be rendered as “after that.” Whatever the strength of any grammatical argument, the Old Testament does not record any further miraculous unions, and the pattern

¹⁰ Gibbs, *Cambridge Handbook*, 5.

¹¹ Gary Anderson, “Celibacy or Consummation in the Garden? Reflections on Early Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Garden of Eden,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82.2 (1989): 125–26.

of marriage subsequently was that the man and woman were born naturally of their own parents and not miraculously formed by God.

It seems, however, that the overwhelming academic consensus is that Genesis 2:24 describes a relationship that in some way replicates the Adam and Eve relationship and that the primal couple is the model for subsequent mundane marriages.¹² This conflation of the miraculous primal couple marriage and all subsequent marriages has obfuscated the nature of the Genesis 2:24 marriage, and in particular what is meant by its “one flesh” union. I suggest that the key to understanding the etiology of mundane marriage, the Bible’s marital imagery—and Paul’s comment in Ephesians 5:32—is to understand that “one-flesh” expression.¹³

It seems clear that the union of Genesis 2:24, unlike that of Genesis 2:23, is not a literal one-flesh union—there is no miraculous (or mystical) union of the flesh suggested in the verse, nor any evidence in the Old Testament record that this was how mundane marriage was later understood. We are told that the couple “shall become one flesh” (וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד; *wehayu lebasar ’ekhad*); thus, unlike the marriage of Adam and Eve, their “one flesh” status is a construct of their union, not a pre-existing state. This concept appears to be underpinned by the Hebrew. Verse 23 has the phrase בָּשָׂר מִבְּשָׂרִי (*basar mibbesari*) employing the inseparable preposition מִן (*min*; “from”) and thus might be translated as “flesh from my flesh,” as per the International Standard Version (even though most Bible versions opt for “flesh of my flesh,” which would normally require a construct phrase). This can be contrasted with verse 24, where the inseparable preposition לְ (*l*; “into”) is used (לְבָשָׂר; *lebasar*)—thus Eve was formed *from* Adam (v. 23), whereas the mundane marriage couple come *into* their one-flesh union (v. 24).¹⁴

2. The Genesis 2:24 One-Flesh Union Forms a New Family

At the heart of Genesis 2:24 is a metaphoric concept—immediately after the description of the miraculous primal couple in Genesis 2:23 being declared to be (literally) one flesh, Adam describing Eve as “flesh of my flesh,”

¹² For a representative list of publications over the last twenty years that articulate such a view, see Colin Hamer, *Marital Imagery in the Bible: An Exploration of Genesis 2:24 and Its Significance for the Understanding of New Testament Divorce and Remarriage Teaching* (London: Apostolos, 2015), 67–68.

¹³ Pauline authorship for the purposes of this article is assumed. It might be noted that Genesis 2:24 is specifically employed in metaphoric cross-mapping in Ephesians 5:32–33 and 1 Corinthians 6:15–16 in a strikingly similar way, thus possibly lending weight to that assumption.

¹⁴ I am grateful to David Instone-Brewer for pointing out to me this aspect of the Hebrew grammar of Gen 2:23–24.

we are told that in subsequent marriages “they [the couple] shall become one flesh.” The two entities are said to equate—A (the couple) is (or rather becomes) B (a one-flesh union). It is not literally true (and such a consanguineous marital union would be forbidden in the Pentateuch)—thus the statement has all the characteristics of a metaphor—and is instead, as Sam Glucksberg terms it, a “literally false assertion.”¹⁵ In other words, the Genesis 2:24 one-flesh marital union is a metaphoric restatement of the Genesis 2:23 literal one-flesh union of Adam and Eve.

Bruce Kaye comments that rabbinic interest in Genesis 2:24 centered on whether or not the husband leaving his parents to join his wife reflected a matrilineal family structure in Jewish history.¹⁶ But having reviewed the evidence for the idea that Hebrew patriarchy was preceded by a more remote matriarchal regime, David Mace concludes, “Such a view is now entirely out of the question.”¹⁷ It is more probable that, as William Loader observes, the “leaving” of father and mother indicates a “new social reality, the beginning of a new household.”¹⁸

Marriages in ancient Israel were formed by means of a volitional, conditional covenant, such being either understood—or articulated orally, or in writing. When the agreement was made, the bride, usually after a betrothal period, would leave her family and become part of her husband’s family.¹⁹ The new “one flesh” status is often symbolized in the West today when the bride takes her husband’s family name—she is “counted as” being in his family. Thus David Instone-Brewer comments that in ancient Israel, “‘They shall be one flesh’ would probably have been interpreted to mean ‘they shall be one family.’”²⁰ And John Skinner points out that in both Hebrew and Arabic, the word “flesh” is synonymous with clan or kindred group, and he references Leviticus 25:49, where the English Standard Version translates *basar* (“flesh”) as “clan.”²¹ Kaye states,

¹⁵ Sam Glucksberg, “How Metaphors Create Categories—Quickly,” in Gibbs, *Cambridge Handbook*, 67–68.

¹⁶ Bruce Kaye, “‘One Flesh’ and Marriage,” *Colloquium* 2 (May 1990): 49.

¹⁷ David. R. Mace, *Hebrew Marriage: A Sociological Study* (London: Epworth, 1953), 76–82.

¹⁸ William R. G. Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 12.

¹⁹ Daniel I. Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 58.

²⁰ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 22.

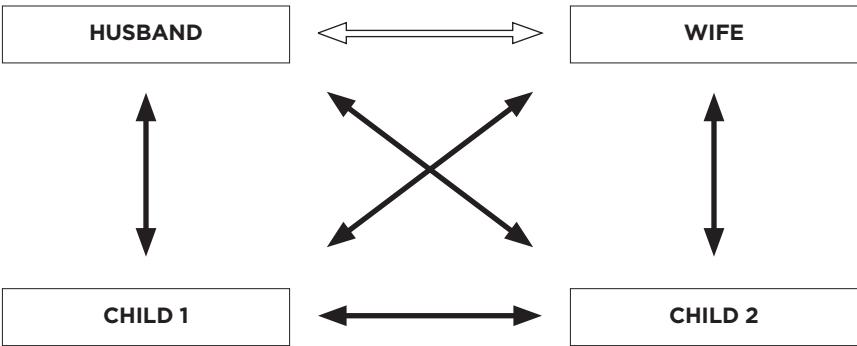
²¹ John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 70.

The term “flesh and bone” occurs only eight times in the Old Testament apart from Genesis 2:23. In Genesis 29:14 and 37:27 it directly and clearly means someone who is a close blood relation.... In general terms, the phrase has the immediate and direct sense of blood relation but, as well, is used figuratively of a close relationship.²²

Dennis McCarthy clarifies the situation when he says a covenant was “the means the ancient world took to extend relationships beyond the natural unity by blood.”²³ And Tom Holland considers the various understandings of *basar* (flesh) in the Hebrew Bible and sees that a covenantal concept is contained in its semantic field: “Here [Gen 2:24] ‘flesh,’ implies the covenant relationship a man has with his wife.”²⁴

In light of this analysis it can be seen that Genesis 2:24 could be—and to achieve a contextually sensitive understanding of its meaning probably should be—translated as, “After that [i.e., after the marriage of the primal couple], a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one family.” Thus, the Genesis 2:24 one-flesh union is a marital affinity union, in contrast to the Genesis 2:23 consanguineous union of Adam and Eve.

A mixture of “one flesh” unions (affinity and consanguineous) are evidenced in any family with birth children. Such can be diagrammatically represented thus:



²² Kaye, “One Flesh,” 48–49.

²³ Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*, AB 21 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1963), 175. The marriage agreement is often referred to as a “covenant” by New Testament scholars, and this article will use that same terminology, but in so doing it is not intended to endorse any later connotations of such.

²⁴ Tom Holland, *Romans: The Divine Marriage* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 203; for further discussion, see Hamer, *Marital Imagery*, §1.4.3–4.

The parent/child/sibling relationships are consanguineous and occupy the same conceptual domain as that of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:23, in that these relationships are (and always were) one flesh—they are nonvolitional, noncovenantal, and permanent—a reality, not a construct. In contrast, the Genesis 2:24 one-flesh relationship between the husband and wife is a construct of a volitional, covenantal union, a construct that nevertheless brings the Old Testament prohibited degrees of affinity into force—that is, certain sexual relationships are now forbidden to the new family, as outlined in Leviticus 18 and 20.

The differences between the conceptual domain of the literal one-flesh relationship of the primal couple and that of the one-flesh construct of mundane marriage can be set out as below:

Genesis 2:23	Genesis 2:24
1. A miraculous man and woman.	1. A naturally born man and woman.
2. Remain as they are.	2. Choose to become what they are not.
3. In a literal one-flesh blood union.	3. In a marital affinity relationship.
4. Without the need for a covenant.	4. By means of a volitional covenant.

Despite these differences, Gordon Wenham, reflecting the academic consensus and the conflation of the etiology of marriage in the two verses, states that Genesis 2:24 is “a comment of the narrator, applying the principles of the first marriage to every marriage”;²⁵ however, it can be seen that the four principles of Genesis 2:24 outlined above are mutually exclusive to the principles underlying Genesis 2:23 and the first marriage described there.

But before the implications of this understanding of the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24 are considered, it needs to be established if that is the way it was understood by the New Testament writers when they cited the verse.

3. The New Testament Understanding of the Genesis 2:24 One-Flesh Union

Paul declared himself to be a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Phil 3:5), and demonstrated by his great many quotes from the Old Testament that he was not only thoroughly familiar with it, but that he built his understanding of the gospel on it. Despite this, the tendency within the church and academy has been to place Paul’s thinking in a

²⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 70.

Hellenistic context.²⁶ Barbara Sly comments,

By interpreting the Scripture of the Jews in terms of Platonic tradition of his day Philo of Alexandria made a profound contribution to the religious consciousness of the West.... [He] created a link between Jewish Scripture and Greek philosophy.²⁷

It is clear that such a Neoplatonic perspective influenced the post-apostolic church's view of marriage. John Witte Jr. points out,

Classical [Greco-Roman] sources were a critical foundation for Western marriage. Some of these classical teachings found a place in the writings and canon developed by the church fathers in the first five centuries CE, particularly in the writings of Augustine of Hippo.²⁸

James Dunn considers the Greek word *sarx* (flesh) in the Pauline corpus and points out that the dominant view has been that Paul's use of the word reflects a combination of both Jewish and Hellenistic features.²⁹ However, Holland surveys the use of the word "flesh" (Hebrew *basar* and Greek *sarx*) in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and suggests that Paul's use of *sarx* in the New Testament reflects the varied understanding of *basar* that the Hebrew Bible demonstrates.³⁰ Holland contrasts those Hebraic understandings with the Hellenist concept of *sarx*, which he points out embraces the concept of the individual sinful human body. This latter perspective is seen in the original edition of the New International Version (NIV), where *sarx* is translated as "sinful nature." Holland then suggests that the New Testament churches, although using the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible, would have known the Hebraic concept of *sarx*, and would have understood that Paul employed the term in a Hebraic way.³¹

Thus, Holland believes Paul employs *sarx* in Philippians 3 in a typical Hebraic way to mean the "covenant people of God," that is, the "family" of Israel:

For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe

²⁶ See discussion of this issue in Holland, *Romans*, 1–6.

²⁷ Dorothy Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, BJS 209 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), v, 1.

²⁸ John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 18.

²⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 56, 62.

³⁰ Holland, *Romans*, 203–25.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. (Phil 3:3–6)

On this Dunn agrees with Holland:

The problem was that this confidence was understood in classic Reformation terms as confidence in human ability to keep the law.... What had been lost sight of, however, was the fact that in the immediate context, “confidence in the flesh” for Paul was confidence in belonging to the people of Israel.... It follows then that it is *sarx* as denoting membership of Israel.³²

And, as A. T. Robinson comments,

when it is remembered that our modern use of ... “flesh” is almost wholly conditioned by ... Hellenic presuppositions, it is clear that great care must be observed if we are not to read into Paul’s thought ideas which are foreign to him.³³

This seems to be the reasoning behind the NIV translation committee’s decision in the 2011 edition to render *sarx* mostly as simply “flesh”—leaving the reader to decide its meaning, rather than translating it as “sinful nature,” as it had in the past.³⁴

Notwithstanding the perspectives of some recent scholarship, the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24, when employed in the New Testament (Matt 19:3–6; Mark 10:6–9; 1 Cor 6:15–16; Eph 5:31–32), has historically been understood as a spiritual, or at least a mystical/mysterious union, with a heavenly dimension. This perspective underpinned the Church of Rome’s understanding of marriage as a sacrament that conveyed grace. Eventually, at the 1563 Council of Trent, it was formally declared that marriage was to be conducted by a priest and the ceremony to involve a couple who were consenting baptized adults and such, “spiritually transformed their relationship,” creating an indissoluble union.³⁵

But if we accept that the references to the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24 in the New Testament are to be understood in its Hebraic sense of “one family,” and not in a newly defined Hellenistic, Neoplatonic sense of a spiritual union, this would imply that New Testament teaching did not change the Old Testament understanding of marriage. In ancient Israel,

³² Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 69.

³³ A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology*, SBT 5 (London: SCM, 1952), 11–12.

³⁴ See comments on FIC: “NIV Changes ‘Sinful Nature’ to ‘Flesh.’” No pages. Cited November 11, 2017. Online: <http://www.ficm.org.uk/news/2011-01-30>.

³⁵ Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 77–112; Peter J. Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Beliefs Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 363–68.

marriage was not considered to have a heavenly dimension—there is no recorded involvement of a priest or even a recognized verbal formula—it was rather a civil matter for the two families involved. I suggest that New Testament teaching shares that same perspective, Jesus stating that “in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt 22:30).³⁶

I would argue in light of this that the Reformers, as they looked afresh at the text of Scripture, were correct to reject marriage as a sacrament as defined by the Church of Rome, and instead to move toward the understanding that marriage is a creation ordinance.³⁷ But there is no uniform position on this among Reformed believers today, as demonstrated by the signatory list of the 2017 Nashville Statement, which in its first article—“We deny that marriage is a mere human contract rather than a covenant before God”—in effect denies that marriage is a creation ordinance.³⁸

4. *The Understanding of “One Flesh” as a Union Created by Coitus*

Before we can address our passage, Ephesians 5:31–32, where Paul says that Genesis 2:24 equates to Christ and the church, another issue needs to be clarified: Is the “one flesh” union of Genesis 2:24 created by sexual intercourse? Such a view is held by many (seemingly *contra* John 4:17–18) and is based on a literal understanding of the “prostitute” in 1 Corinthians 6:15–16:³⁹

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” (1 Cor 6:15–16)

Loader comments:

Sexual intercourse leads to people becoming “one flesh”.... Again we have to draw on Gen. 2:24. I make myself a member of a prostitute by having sexual intercourse with her.⁴⁰

³⁶ See analysis in Hamer, *Marital Imagery*, §5, §9.

³⁷ Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract*, 130–34; there is a detailed account of Calvin’s position and that of his contemporaries in Geneva in John Witte Jr. and Robert M. Kingdon, *Sex, Marriage and Family in John Calvin’s Geneva*, vol. 1, *Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

³⁸ CBMW, “Nashville Statement,” no pages; Cited November 11, 2017. Online: <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement>. Gordon Hugenberger in his exhaustive consideration of this subject fails to find a definitive example of a marriage in Scripture being formed or witnessed under divine sanction: Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

³⁹ Holland points out the literal understanding of the prostitute that many scholars hold. Tom Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2004), 124–39.

⁴⁰ William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 170, 172.

Loader believes that Paul is teaching that sexual intercourse with a prostitute creates a new ontological reality, and he reads such into the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24—despite pointing out that in the Old Testament, “בשר [flesh] can be used metaphorically ... for one’s own kin or family.”⁴¹ And a careful reading of this Corinthian pericope should alert us to a problem—Paul relates the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24 to the relationship of the Corinthian believers with Christ (in the same manner as in Eph 5:31–32), *and* to their relationship with a “prostitute.” Thus, I suggest that Paul employs “prostitute” in the same way as the pervasive Old Testament marital imagery does, that is, that Israel *is* the prostitute when she goes after other “gods” (see, e.g., Ezek 16:35)—not that Israel goes *with* prostitutes. That imagery portrays the members of the nation of Israel, by their behavior, just like some church members at Corinth, as identifying themselves with the unbelieving world—making themselves “members of a prostitute”—that is, members of a community of unbelievers. Lynn Huber sees that this concept is exploited in the imagery of Revelation 17–21:

The images of harlot and bride depict two possible forms of existence for the Christian community. The community can live in idolatry, as a prostitute, or the community can live in faithfulness to God, as a bride.⁴²

Such an exegesis is consonant with the Old Testament “one family” understanding of the one-flesh union of Genesis 2:24. To paraphrase Paul’s words to the Corinthian believers,

Which family have you covenanted to be in—the world, or the church? If it is the church, do not go back to behaving like that “prostitute”—with all her idolatry and sexual immorality—instead, be true to your status in the family of Christ.⁴³

5. In Summary: The Genesis 2:24 One-Flesh Union

I suggest that the New Testament marital imagery, the root metaphor of which is articulated in Ephesians 5:31–32, can only be successfully analyzed, and Paul’s “profound mystery” understood, if the Genesis 2:24 marriage is taken to be a volitional, covenantal, “one family” union of a man and a woman. It is to that imagery we now turn.

⁴¹ Ibid., 170–77, 278.

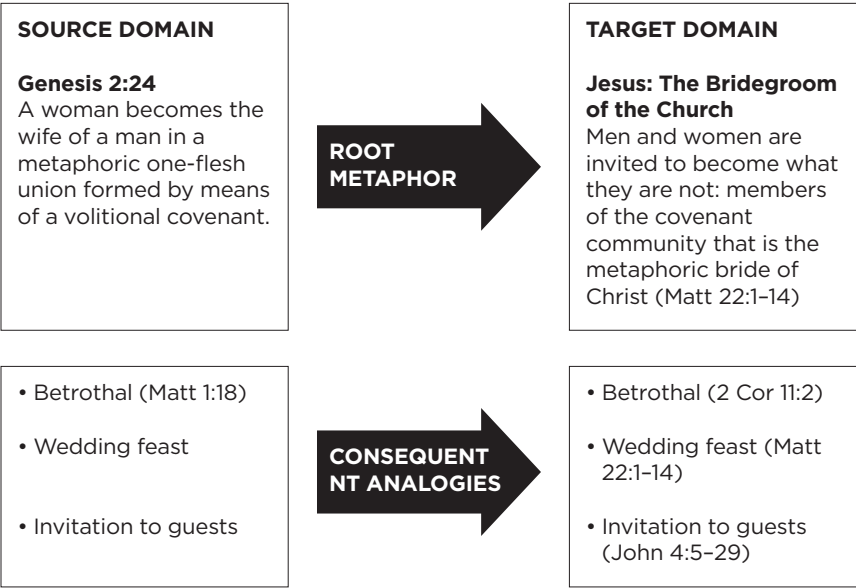
⁴² Lynn R. Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John’s Apocalypse* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 32.

⁴³ For a more detailed analysis of these Corinthian verses, see Hamer, *Marital Imagery*, §1.4.4; §9.4.4.

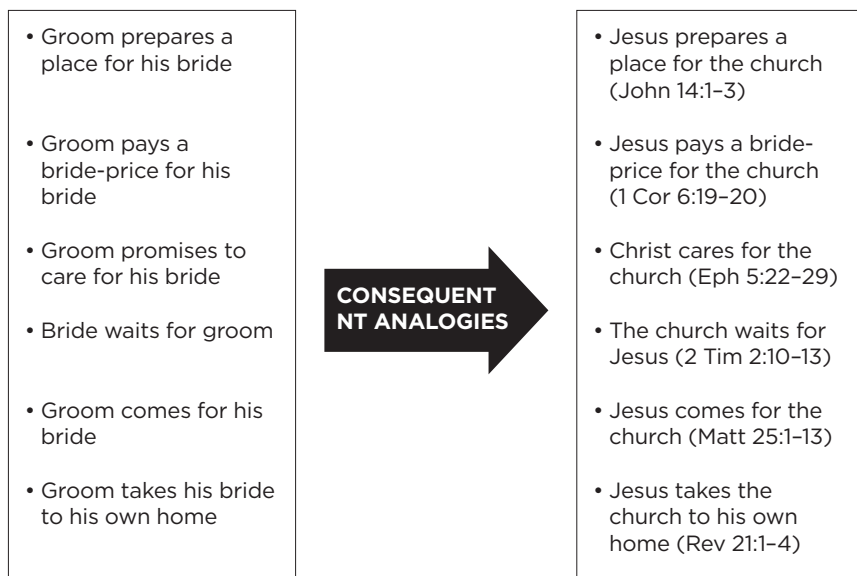
III. *New Testament Marital Imagery*

We saw above that the statement “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps 23:1) is, in effect, a root metaphor statement that gives rise to several consequent analogies. I argue elsewhere that the Bible’s marital imagery is its dominant conceptual metaphor and is the key metanarrative of Scripture from Eden to the eschaton.⁴⁴ The basis of the New Testament marital imagery is the concept that the human marriage relationship “is” the relationship between Christ and the church—thus the root metaphor of the imagery is GENESIS 2:24 IS CHRIST AND THE CHURCH. This root metaphor gives rise to many consequent analogies, and Phillip Long argues that the whole of Jesus’s earthly ministry is told in the Synoptic Gospels as if it were the week before a Jewish wedding—that is, the source domain of the metaphor is populated by Jewish marital practices contemporary to New Testament times.⁴⁵ The imagery also features in the Gospel of John, the Pauline corpus, and, of course, Revelation. It can be mapped like this:

Genesis 2:24 is Christ and the church



⁴⁴ Ibid., 265–73.
⁴⁵ Phillip J. Long, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Origin of the Eschatological Feast as a Wedding Banquet in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 194.



The imagery makes it clear that Jesus is the bridegroom Messiah who came to fulfill the many Old Testament promises of a new “marriage” (a new covenant) for Israel. For example,

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. (Jer 31:31-32)

IV. A Profound Mystery

But the promise of a new covenant is alluded to much earlier in the Scripture record. In Genesis 3:15, we read, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” Paul references this verse when he tells the Roman believers, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:20). Thus, Paul sees that the seed of the woman, the God of peace, and Jesus Christ, are all one and the same. The promised defeat of Satan, and an eventual return into God’s presence, is the gospel that Jesus came to proclaim and fulfill in a new “marriage.” The Genesis 3:15 promise is later restated and applied to Abraham several times. For example,

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice. (Gen 22:17–18)

Paul in his letter to the Galatians makes it clear that this promise foreshadowed the gospel: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’” (Gal 3:8).

He continues by explaining that the “offspring” in Genesis 22:17–18 is a reference to Christ:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. (Gal 3:16–17)

It has been pointed out that the “offspring” (or “seed,” as it is in the NIV) in both Genesis 3:15 and Genesis 22:17–18, in the Hebrew text itself, is a reference to a single seed.⁴⁶ So Paul is not stretching the understanding of the original promise to Abraham to make his point—which is that the text is referring to the promised Messiah. G. K. Beale comments,

There are no clear examples where they [the New Testament writers] have developed a meaning from the Old Testament which is inconsistent or contradictory to some aspect of the original Old Testament intention.⁴⁷

This promise of a specific seed might have been somewhat hidden in the promises to Abraham, Paul himself indicating such when he says in Galatians 3:8, “Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith.” But Paul clarifies that the words “all the nations” in the promise given in Genesis 22:18 demonstrate that it was always God’s intention that all the nations of the earth would be blessed by a single seed whose arrival lay in the distant future—the promised Messiah would be descended from

⁴⁶ Jack Collins, “A Syntactical Note (Genesis 3:15): Is the Woman’s Seed Singular or Plural?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48.1 (1997): 139–48; Desmond T. Alexander, “Further Observations on the Term ‘Seed’ in Genesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 48.2 (1997): 363–67.

⁴⁷ G. K. Beale, “Positive Answer to the Question: Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? An Examination of the Presuppositions of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ Exegetical Method,” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 394, 398.

Abraham. So, Paul directly links the Genesis 3:15 promise to the Genesis 22:17–18 Abrahamic promise of a blessing for “all the nations.”

But Gentiles, who by definition are not of Abraham’s seed, are surely excluded from such a promise? Nonetheless, the inclusion of the Gentiles is the recurring theme of the letter to the Ephesians. For example,

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:11–12)

Ephesians 3:6 calls it a mystery: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” —in fact, by the time Paul gets to chapter 5, he has declared it a mystery no fewer than five times (Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9). And then he says,

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:31–32)

The profound mystery is that the Genesis 2:24 marital affinity union is the basis of the inclusion of the Gentiles. As seen above (II.2), that union is formed when a naturally born man and woman choose to become what they are not, in a marital affinity relationship, by means of a volitional covenant—the bride is now counted as being in her husband’s family. Thus, those outside of Abraham’s family can choose to become, by faith, what they are not (albeit drawn by the Holy Spirit, as John 6:44 explains)—that is, members of the body of Christ, the church. The church’s bridegroom is, as Galatians 3:16 tells us, the promised seed of Abraham. It follows that the whole church, at the eschaton, comes into a marital affinity relationship with the seed of Abraham—and thus can be counted as being in his family.

This analysis is strengthened when it is considered that in Romans 9 Paul again appeals to the Bible’s marital imagery to make his point about the inclusion of the Gentiles. The Old Testament promises a new exodus to a new marriage—which is described as a new covenant (e.g., Hos 1:9–11; 2:14–15; Isa 54:1–10; Jer 31:31–33). Paul says,

As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’ And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’” (Rom 9:25–26)

Earlier in the chapter, Paul states it this way: “This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Rom 9:8). It seems he is contrasting the basis of the Mosaic covenant—entry into which was determined by a Genesis 2:23 consanguineous, one-flesh union with the Abrahamic seed—with the Genesis 2:24 affinity relationship of the new covenant whereby the church is *counted* as being “one flesh” with the Abrahamic seed.⁴⁸ Jeremiah 31:31–33 points out that in the new covenant the law will be written on the hearts of its participants, and such is possibly a reference to its Genesis 2:24 volitional affinity basis. And it is perhaps coincidental, but of interest, that these two key covenants, the Mosaic and the new covenant, have their core etiology expressed in two verses adjacent to each other in the Scripture record—especially as Genesis 2:24 is out of sequence in the Edenic story.

There are several other views of what Paul meant by his “profound mystery,” but space prevents an analysis of them in this article.⁴⁹ However, nearly all are based on two misunderstandings. Those who see the mystery as lying in human marriage have failed, it seems, to grasp how metaphors function. When the psalmist says, “The LORD is my shepherd,” the source domain of the metaphor, the shepherd on the Palestinian hillside with his sheep, is not the mystery, nor is he changed by the metaphoric statement. What changes is our perception of the Lord. The same applies to all metaphors, not just to the many biblical ones. Thus, whether the tangible source domain of the metaphor that illustrates a less tangible truth is seed (Luke 8:11) or leaven (Matt 16:6) or (notwithstanding any confessional position) bread (Matt 26:26) or human marriage, as in our two verses in Ephesians 5, the source of the metaphor does not change, nor is there any “mystery” in the source domain itself; the mystery is what that tangible reality of the source domain illustrates. If this were not the case, the purpose of the metaphor would be defeated.

The second confusion lies in the conflation of Genesis 2:23 with Genesis 2:24—thus most exegetes see Ephesians 5:31–32 as saying that “Adam and Eve = Christ and the church.” J. Paul Sampley, in his biblical monograph

⁴⁸ The John 1:12–13 reference to those “born of the flesh” is probably a reference to Mosaic covenant members; if so, John is making the same point made in Rom 9:8.

⁴⁹ See Hamer, *Marital Imagery*, §9.4.8.

on Ephesians 5:21–33, points out that when Paul has already employed “mystery” five times in the letter to refer to the inclusion of the Gentiles, it is reasonable to assume that he employs the word in the same way in Ephesians 5:32—but what puzzles him is how that relates to Adam and Eve. Based on that understanding, he attempts, as do others, to pursue a typological analysis.⁵⁰ But Paul employs metaphoric imagery throughout the longer pericope (Eph 5:21–33) of which our two verses are the climax, in that they describe the affinity basis of the New Testament metaphoric marital imagery and link that to the mechanism for including the Gentiles in the Abrahamic promise.

In Summary: Genesis 2:24 and the New Covenant

This article has attempted to demonstrate that Ephesians 5:31–32 articulates the root metaphor of New Testament marital imagery, and that the profound mystery is that the “one flesh” marital affinity union of Genesis 2:24 is how the new covenant fulfills the Abrahamic promise and brings the elect of “all the nations” into union with Christ. Thus, a *sensus plenior* is read into Genesis 2:24 that foreshadows redemptive history.⁵¹

⁵⁰ J. Paul Sampley, *And the Two Shall Become One Flesh: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21–33*, SNTSMS 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 52, 83, 91, 100–101. The primal couple typologically prefigure Christ and the church at the eschaton: Adam is a miraculously created man / Christ is a miraculously conceived man; Eve is miraculously made from Adam / the church is miraculously brought into being by the Holy Spirit; Adam marries Eve, his own body / Christ marries the church, his own body—both unions are specifically formed by God.

⁵¹ Accepting that *sensus plenior* differs from typology in that the meaning is in the words rather than in the people or the event.