

## ***BIBLICAL ATTITUDES TO ROMANTIC LOVE***

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### I INTRODUCTION

#### Romantic Love

"When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less". The word 'love' can be understood in a number of ways, according to the speaker and context in question. The term 'romantic' is perhaps even more liable to misunderstanding, especially when coupled with 'love'. One dictionary, for example, defines 'romance' as a 'mediaeval tale of chivalry', or 'a tale with scenes and incidents remote from ordinary life, this class of literature, an episode or love affair suggesting it . . . sympathetic imaginativeness; exaggeration or falsehood'.<sup>2</sup> 'Romantic' has an even less encouraging set of definitions: '1) marked by, suggestive of, or given to, romance; imaginative, visionary, fantastic, impractical; 2) (in art and literature) preferring grandeur, and picturesqueness, or passion and irregular beauty to finish and proportion . . .'. To many people 'romantic' simply refers to a poetic world of fantasy, dream, escape and remoteness. Yet the expression 'romantic love' is often also used to refer to the love of two persons of the opposite sex for one another, understood and expressed in terms of attraction and devotion to each other, and delight and joy in appreciation of each other, including the sexual and physical dimension, but not confined to that alone. It is in the latter sense that this paper will understand the expression 'romantic love'.

1. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (London: Dean & Son, n.d.) 142.
2. *The Pocket Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 5th edition, 1969).

C. S. Lewis once wrote: 'A romantic theologian does not mean one who is romantic about theology, but one who is theological about romance, one who considers the theological implications of those experiences which are called romantic.'<sup>3</sup> A fresh look at the Bible's understanding of romantic love, or love between the sexes, especially in relation to courtship and marriage, is made advisable by three historical and cultural trends. First, the mediaeval idea of courtly love, which entered with the Provençal poets of Languedoc, apparently as a total novelty,<sup>5</sup> in the eleventh century and swept across Europe in the succeeding years with the troubadours, continues to reverberate through Western culture. It has left behind it a double legacy: the frequent identification of romance and sexual love with love outside marriage; and a tendency for romantic and sexual relationships to be anchored in fantasy rather than reality.<sup>4</sup> Though a lengthy literary process of development in two directions, the result of this today can be seen at grass-roots level in the often sexless fantasy romances of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century cheaper women's books and magazines on the one hand, and in pornographic magazines for men on the other.

A second historical fact is the exceedingly poor track record of much of the teaching programme of the Christian churches in the West on the subject of sexuality, love and marriage, the legacy of which is also still with us. Both E. Schillebeeckx and J. Dominian<sup>5</sup> point out that the Roman Catholic Church has not only exalted celibacy as the highest estate in Christian life and ministry, but has also tended to justify sexual relations and even marriage itself almost exclusively in terms of the procreation of children. It has generally written and spoken of marriage in canonical and juridical terms, rather than in terms of interpersonal love and relationships. While there have

3. C. S. Lewis (ed.) in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford: OUP, 1947) vi.
4. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: OUP, 1970 reprint) 2ff.
5. E. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Human Reality and Saving Mystery* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1965), Introduction; J. Dominian, *Christian Marriage* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967) 17ff.

certainly been exceptions to this among the churches of the Reformation and their heirs, yet on the whole these also have been similarly affected by distorted vision.

The combination of these first two historical trends goes some way towards explaining the penetrating observation made by D. Sherwin Bailey: 'The church has been unable to prevent the secularization and debasement of the romantic ideal. . . That there seemed to be no middle way between "puritanism" and licence was due to the fact that romanticism had been allowed to become a purely secular force. The Reformation mitigated, but did not remove, this anomaly, and even in modern times we have seen the church somewhat hesitant in asserting itself against secularism in such matters as sex education, and in resisting the encroachments of pseudo-romanticism.'<sup>6</sup> A re-examination of the biblical witness may show how tragic and damning an indictment this truly is.

Thirdly, as Schillebeeckx correctly observes in the introduction to his excellent book on marriage,<sup>7</sup> recent developments in western socio-economic and cultural patterns make it especially appropriate and urgent for the Church to re-examine the place of romantic love, 'in other words, the discovery of the personal aspect of marriage', which 'in the past was seldom the subject of discussion'.<sup>8</sup> These developments include the breakdown of the supportive structures of the larger tribal, clan and extended family unit (and even of much community life), and its replacement by the small, isolated nuclear family unit; the greatly raised status and changing role of women in society and in the pattern of family life; the advent of modern contraceptive techniques; the much more widespread expectation of personal fulfilment and happiness through the marital relationship; and the easier obtaining of divorce. If the interpersonal relationship and mutual love of the two partners are not adequate to support a marriage,

6. D. Sherwin Bailey, *The Mystery of Love and Marriage: A Study in the Theology of the Sexual Relation* (London: SCM, 1952) 9.
7. *Marriage*, Introduction.
8. *Ibid.* xix.

there is not a great deal else in society today to do so. Much as we may regret this fact, it surely lends pressing urgency to a consideration of this whole subject by Christian people, especially those who teach.

Deliberately broadening our definition and understanding of the expression 'romantic love' beyond what some uses of the term 'romantic' would allow, we shall now turn to the Old and New Testaments to examine the attitudes to romantic love to be found there, that is, to love between man and woman, which includes the sexual dimension in the narrower sense but goes beyond it to embrace much more in the interpersonal relationship, especially with regard to man and woman in courtship and marriage. (This is not of course to deny either that men and women relate in many other ways and contexts - as children, parents, brothers and sisters, friends, co-workers, etc. - or that their maleness and femaleness in the widest sense is relevant in those relationships. It is merely to restrict the scope of our enquiry, hopefully to manageable proportions.)

## II THE OLD TESTAMENT

### A. *Cultural Factors*

When we turn to Scripture the possible distinction between 'biblical' patterns and attitudes and the divine pattern has to be borne in mind at certain points. In other words, we have to make due allowance, first of all, for the medium of a divine revelation given in the context of ancient Near Eastern and Semitic social customs and cultural patterns. These include marriage patterns and customs, and the management of relationships between the sexes in family and social contexts there (*e.g.*, the arranged marriage pattern, the veiling of women or girls). These do not necessarily convey a divine pattern for all time. Secondly, divine patterns, ideals and paradigms, divine commands and even divine approval (expressed or implied), must be distinguished from the concrete achievements or lack of them by people in Israelite society in any given time and instance, or even

9. Cf. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage* 8, 82.

throughout much of the OT period. For instance, was the position of women in marriage and the family implied in Genesis 2 always borne in mind and mirrored in later Israelite society? And how does Christ's redeeming of us from the curse of the law affect the curse on the woman in Genesis 3 in practice for us today?<sup>10</sup>

This is such an important background factor that it requires some attention at the outset. The ideal and practice of romantic love, of interpersonal love and relationships in relation to sexuality and marriage, are bound to be affected by several other factors. Some of these are: (1) the prevailing idea and ideal of marriage - its nature, function and purpose - in the culture concerned; (2) the prevailing system of marriage, who arranges it and with what ends in view, the ages at which people marry, the pattern of courtship, and even the form of the wedding ceremonies; (3) the position of, and attitude to, women in society and the family, in relation to men; (4) the prevailing understanding of, and attitude to, human sexuality; (5) the prevalent pattern of social and family life, including the allocation of roles, tasks and time, and the size and pattern of the family or tribal unit; and (6) the controlling concepts of love and responsibility behind human relationships and life as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

A brief look at the prevailing system of marriage will serve to illustrate the possible influence of one such factor here. It is well known that throughout the biblical period the ancient Near East generally worked a system of parentally arranged marriages, and this was clearly the pattern in Israel,<sup>12</sup> possibly due in part to the relatively young ages (thirteen and twelve years) at which boys and girls reached marriageable age. This did not necessarily mean that the young people

10. Gn. 3:16; Gal. 3:13. Polygamy and male headship are two relevant issues, for instance.
11. Most of these will be referred to in the course of this paper, but generally only in passing, insofar as they directly affect this study,
12. See, *e.g.*, Gn. 21:21; 38:6; Ru. 3:1-2; I Sa. 18:21.

themselves were not consulted. In at least two instances in the OT (Shechem and Samson) they expressed their choice first, and left the parents to negotiate the marriage for them; Esau rejected his parents' choice; Abraham sent his servant to find the right sort of wife for Isaac, but Rebekah's family asked for her agreement; Jacob was told by his father the direction in which he was to look for a bride, and then sent off to go and find her himself; and an older man like Boaz arranged things himself, though still with regard to wider family issues.<sup>13</sup> So the pattern was reasonably flexible according to age and circumstances, but it was still a parentally arranged pattern which prevailed. The main reasons for this are probably connected with the universally recognized need to marry in order to raise up descendants to continue a man's and a family's inheritance among Yahweh's covenant people, and the feeling that marriage in reality involved far more than the simple union of a man and woman - it involved a relationship, expressed as a binding contract, between the two families concerned, who presumably could then be counted on to give their general support to the couple in the years ahead.

To anyone growing up in a different society and culture, where an idea of romantic love grounded on a personal choice by the couple on the sole basis of mutual attraction rules supreme and unquestioned, a parental arrangement of the Israelite type may seem appallingly uncongenial. Others may wonder whether it was any more dangerous and hurtful than the present 'free-for-all' system obtaining in the western world, which perhaps offers much less protection to vulnerable young people today. The general merits or demerits of the biblical system of arranged marriage do not concern us here, however, but rather two or three facts and implications surrounding it.

First, parentally arranged marriage as such never receives explicit divine approval or disapproval as a system.<sup>14</sup> It may, like slavery, monarchy or imperial

13. Gn. 34:4, 8; Jdg. 14:2; Gn. 26:34-5; 24:1ff. and v. 58; 28:1-5; Ru. 3:11-4:13.

14. On one interpretation of the Song of Songs it may be felt there is an implicit disapproval of certain aspects of it in relation to the king's harem.

government, simply be accepted as part of the status quo, although some (like Abraham) used the system in a better and more godly way than others. Legislation was introduced to curtail and limit the abuses of this and other aspects of marriage and human relationships,<sup>15</sup> but the system as such (as opposed to marriage itself) is not approved or condemned by comparison with any other system. Secondly, however, the system points us to two things which may be important corollaries, and which seem to place a question-mark against certain non-biblical ideas of romantic love. It focuses attention upon the whole family unit in society, and not just on the couple alone. Moreover, it allows for an understanding of love in marriage which has at least as much to do with the commitment of the will as with the state of the emotions, glands or hormones. One writer comments: 'If it was (earlier) possible to write: "I love you, because you are my wife", there is no doubt that modern man would express this the other way round: "You are my wife because I love you".<sup>16</sup> When we come to look at the idea of love in the Old and New Testaments, this point will be reinforced further.

It is generally accepted that in the Middle Ages the romantic ideal of courtly love as a love *outside* marriage grew up because there was no room for it in marriages which were arranged, often in childhood, almost entirely for social or political convenience, and in which the woman's place was so far from being equal to the man that she was part of his property rather than his partner.<sup>17</sup> It might be imagined that the biblical pattern of arranged marriages and male headship would likewise banish interpersonal and romantic love from the marital bond, or at least make it difficult and improbable. But in fact, despite the human shortcomings and failures of which Scripture has many examples, we shall find that this is not necessarily the case.

15. *E.g.*, in Ex. 21:7-11; Dt. 21:10-14; 24:1-5; 25:5-10.

16. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage* xix.

17. Lewis, *Allegory* 13. See also D. Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (London: Nisbet, 1968) 119-230, in correction of D. de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World* (New York: Pantheon, 1956 edition).

B. *'From The Beginning. . .'*

The interpersonal relationship of love between a man and a woman which includes specifically sexual attraction and intimacy is placed by Scripture from the very first in the context of marriage as both its natural God-given goal and the proper context for its full enjoyment and expression. The two accounts of the creation of man in Genesis 1 and 2 complement one another here. The first<sup>18</sup> in Genesis 1:26ff. stresses the creation of man as male and female and links this bi-sexual creation with the image of God and fruitfulness in multiplying so as to fill the earth and subdue it. This important aspect of human sexuality, the bearing of 'seed' (in common with the rest of the living creatures) is never lost sight of in Scripture. But it is not the only rationale, purpose or justification of the man/woman relationship, nor therefore of marriage, since in Genesis 2:18ff. it is rather the fitting help and companionship which God gives to the man through woman which is in view - a partnership which no other creature could provide. It is in this context that the 'one-flesh' union and cleaving of the man and woman are understood here, and this union forms the basis of all the possibilities, delights and joys of married love which are referred to later in the biblical writings. The springs of romantic love between husband and wife lie in Genesis 2, and the reference to 'leaving and cleaving' in v. 24 makes it clear that the union of the two as one flesh refers to a dedication to partnership together in the whole of life, and not just to sexual intercourse.<sup>19</sup>

18. First, that is, in the pages of Scripture, but not necessarily in chronological order of composition.
19. At first sight 1 Cor. 6:16 might seem to argue differently, but L. Smedes argues convincingly that the force of Paul's argument is concerned to affirm that the logic and intention of intercourse in itself is an inter-personal life-union (*Sex in The Real World* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976; Berkhamsted, Herts.: Lion, 1979] 120-126).

Genesis 1 and 2 both state the goodness of human sexuality in its physical and other aspects as God's creation, the first chapter by God's viewing all that he had made as 'very good', and the second by its closing statement of the couple's unashamed nakedness. But the disobedience and resultant curse of the following chapter produce fear, guilt, shame and 'cover-up', and a dislocation and inequality in their relationship to one another as well as to their Creator and the rest of creation. Even after this the author goes on to describe the sexual union and intercourse of the man and his wife as personal 'knowledge' of one another (Gn. 4:1, 17, 25), thereby stressing that sexual intimacy is a revealing form of inter-personal knowledge, and underlining the character of our physical sexuality as an aspect of the personalities of creatures made together in the image of God. H. Thielicke expresses it thus: 'The mystery of man consists in the interconnection of personhood and *bios*.'<sup>20</sup>

Declension follows on from the fall of man and woman, including polygamy, violence, abuse, incest, and rape, which in due course have to be curbed and controlled by clear and strong laws reinforcing and moulding social conventions and behaviour.<sup>21</sup> But the significance of the opening chapters of Genesis for our theme is paramount in making clear the Creator's intention in creating man and woman, however far short of its fulfilment particular people or societies may fall in later years. Monogamous marriage is the ideal, with a clear affirmation of the goodness on every level of human sexuality, and the union which it makes possible. This union has in view both the raising of children to multiply the race, and also the unique partnership of love, help and complementarity between man and wife. Since Genesis 2 and later parts of Scripture stress that it is marriage that is here in view,<sup>22</sup> it is difficult to overstate the significance of the Bible's placing of such love from the first firmly in the context of the committed union of marriage.

20. H. Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex* (London: Clarke, 1964) 20.

21. See Ex. 21:7-11; 22:16-17; Lv. 18:6ff.; 19:20-22,29; 20:10-21; Dt. 21:15-17; 22:13-30; 27:20-23.

22. Gn. 2:24; Mt. 19:5; Mk. 10:7; Eph. 5:31.

The themes of the early chapters of Genesis recur and are followed through in varying degrees in many parts of the OT and NT. Sometimes it is the Genesis 1 strand of the picture (*viz.* multiplying) which is to the fore, but at other times it is more the relationship between the partners in the marriage covenant which is in view. The goodness of human sexuality is never lost from sight, but the importance of the perspective and context of its physical expression is constantly stressed. As God's creation it is prevented from assuming a divine authority of its own, as if it were a god in its own right, and it is firmly dissociated by the Mosaic law and the prophets from the cultic context into which the idolatrous fertility religions of the surrounding heathen nations had placed it, cult prostitution being completely outlawed as an abomination to God (Lev. 19:29; Dt. 23:17-18; I Ki. 14:24; Ho. 4:12-14). Men, women and children are protected by strict laws against the worst ravages which sin and waywardness can wreak in human lives and relationships through the abuse of human sexuality.<sup>23</sup> The raising up of children and the continuing of the family line, fruitfulness being seen as God's blessing and the lack of it as his withholding of blessing, are well known biblical themes, slave-concubinage, levirate marriage and other devices being employed at times to secure these things.<sup>24</sup>

Two things are plain at point after point. If sex is not to be a self-authenticating and autonomous form of self-indulgence, context and intention become vital questions relating to its enjoyment. That is why rape is condemned, for instance, as a humiliating and defiling of the woman involved for selfish ends.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in this channelling of sexuality to its God-intended use, a concept of love in human relationships comes to the fore which includes every

23. See the passages cited above in notes 15 and 21, especially Dt. 21:15-17; 24:1-4.

24. *E.g.*, Ps. 127:3-5; 128:3-4, 6; I Sa. 1:5; Dt. 25:5-10; Gn. 16:1-4; 30:1-8.

25. This is seen from (for example) the difference in laws on adultery and fornication in Dt. 22:22-29, or the history of Amnon and Tamar in 2 Sa. 13.

level of personal relationship, and in which commitment and faithfulness are paramount. This leads us to a consideration of the terms used for love and the illustrations of love found in both Testaments.

### *C. Old Testament Terminology and Concepts*

Most commonly the Old Testament uses the terms אהב and אהבה for love, but they do not help us greatly in themselves, being as broad as the term 'love' in English. They certainly included the sexual aspects of love, and some writers believe this was their original derivation; but basically they express an inner feeling of affection towards someone, which normally then finds expression in outward action. Other words are used less frequently and cover different aspects of human love. The most striking and interesting thing about OT terminology, by contrast with our own language and culture, is that there is no word for 'sex'. All the words used (love, desire, male, female, etc.) are fully personal, and only personal. Sex is simply never spoken of as a thing in the OT or NT, but only as an aspect of human persons and human inter-personal relationships. Even in the case of incest, the OT speaks of a man 'loving' his sister (2 Sa. 13:1). The only impersonal terms are ones of condemnation, such as 'perversion' or 'sodomy'. In full accordance with this is the biblical view of the body and soul/spirit as a unity, one person. This undercuts both any impersonal view of the body (whether one's own or another's) and the later Gnostic heresy, based on Greek and oriental pagan dualism, of the moral neutrality and irrelevance of the body's actions - so strongly denied by Paul in 1 Corinthians. The immoral man sins against his own body, which in the case of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit, destined for the Lord in consecration here and resurrection hereafter (1 Cor. 6:12-20). The motivation is Christian, but the view of man is essentially Hebraic.

### *D. Old Testament Examples*

The terms in which the biblical records speak of the love of husband and wife show that the possibility of real love, affection, companionship and delight in each other was recognised and these were to be enjoyed at every level. In Genesis 18:12 Sarah's incredulous and laughing question, 'Shall I have pleasure?', in

the face of the Lord's announcement of the impending conception and birth of Isaac and her own and Abraham's age, presumably shows that the physical union within marriage was associated with pleasure to the woman and that she is not merely referring to the arrival of the child. In Genesis 26:8 Abimelech realises that Rebekah is Isaac's wife because of the endearments they were showing to each other.<sup>26</sup> The verb צחק used here for conjugal caressing also means 'laugh' or 'play', with very happy and perhaps somewhat playful connotations thus being attached to such marital displays of affection. Earlier, in Genesis 24:67, when 'Isaac took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her', the narrative adds simply but eloquently, 'so Isaac was comforted after his mother's death'. This shows appreciation of the unique closeness and basic need of male/female companionship and love and also awareness that it is the closeness of love, care and affection which is so vital in that relationship to meet man's emotional needs.

The Deuteronomic law frees a newly married man for the first year of marriage to be spent at home specifically to enable him 'to be happy with his wife whom he has taken' (Dt. 24:5). The story of Ruth revolves around the need to raise up descendants for Elimelech and his sons in Israel. Yet the charm of the story is the faithful loyalty and compassion shown by the characters in it. What impresses Boaz about Ruth is not merely her physical attractiveness, but her kindness to Naomi, and his protective kindness and generosity to her is likewise appreciated (Ru. 2:8-13; 3:10). Doubtless he was motivated by duty in performing the role of next-of-kin, but the whole narrative impresses the reader with the value of beauty of character and not merely of outward youthful attractiveness of appearance. It also commends doing things properly in accordance with the law, in the context of a man/woman relationship which is finally consummated in marriage. The contrast with the behaviour and values of Samson and some others vis-à-vis women in the preceding book of Judges, when 'every man did what was right in his own eyes', could hardly be more stark! (see Jdg. 14-16,19). Elkanah and

26. The verb used (צחק) is actually the one from which Isaac's name is formed.

Hannah enjoyed a good and close loving relationship, even though no children had been born to them (1 Sa. 1:5, 8). A further testimony to the importance of character in a happy and good marriage relationship is provided by the history of Abigail, the wife of Nabal the Carmelite, who subsequently married David (1 Sa. 25). Her marriage to Nabal (the fool) had obviously been difficult, but in David's eyes marriage to the wise and gracious Abigail promised nothing but good, so he 'wooed her to make her his wife' (1 Sa. 25:39). The strength of his love for her is shown by the way that he and those with him later 'wept until they had no more strength to weep' when they learned of their wives' and children's capture by the Amalekites at Ziklag (1 Sa. 30:3-6).

The life of David is a convenient point at which to pause and notice three other things, before tracing examples of romantic and married love through later parts of Scripture. First, polygamy and concubinage feature there, but in the case of the kings, most notably Solomon, these appear to be seen more as a status-symbol with political significance (*e.g.*, Dt 17:17; 1 Sa. 16:20-22; 1 Ki. 3:1; 11:1-3) than as the sign of a sex-crazy or over-romantic monarch of some Decameron or proto-Hollywood variety. Scripture does not fail to show in several cases the disastrous consequences of these departures from the divine pattern and ideal, even though it does not specifically condemn the practices (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 11:4ff.; Jdg. 8:30-31 and 9; 1 Sa. 1:6). In some matters men are left to learn by experience.

Secondly, the incident of David's adultery with Bathsheba underlines the honesty of the biblical history in not glossing over its heroes' faults, and also the refusal of Scripture to glamourize or romanticize extra-marital sexual adventures or 'affairs' as the western world calls them today. Adultery is still adultery and sin, even when a great king commits it, the trouble started in the mind and heart, when David failed to avert his eyes at the right moment (2 Sa. 11 and 12). Hence our Lord's stress on the heart and eyes as the source of sin in this regard (Mt. 5:27-30), and the wisdom of Job's godly decision: have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could look upon a virgin? What would be my portion from God above? . . . Does he not see my ways, and number all my steps?' (Jb. 31:1-2a, 4; see also v. 9).

Thirdly, David's friendship with Jonathan stands out as testifying to the strength of a love between two close friends of the same sex. It is twice stated that 'Jonathan loved David as his own soul (or life)' (1 Sa. 18:1; 20:17) and this love is re-inforced by a covenant backed by the 'loyal love of Yahweh' (1 Sa. 20:14-17). It is celebrated by David after the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in the famous phrases: 'I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan. Very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, surpassing the love of women' (2 Sa. 1:26). There is no suggestion anywhere in the text that there was anything wrong with their relationship (as if it were homosexual), and their friendship would not have been so celebrated in Scripture if there had been. It is a testimony to the strength of committed and loving but 'non-sexual' friendship that can exist between two members of the same sex. The phrase 'surpassing the love of women' is the highest compliment David can pay to Jonathan's love, for Scripture does not have the generally low view of conjugal love reflected, for example, in Aristotle's grudging admission that 'the conjugal relation may now and then rise to the same level as the virtuous friendship between good men'.<sup>27</sup> The Bible does regard general social fellowship and intercourse outside the family as normally likely to be enjoyed between members of the same sex. The way in which the unmarried Jesus was able to count women among his firm friends as well as men, in a love without sexual undertones, is particularly striking against his Jewish background, but may well have been even more so against that of the Graeco-Roman pagan world.

The book of Esther shows the low status of women and the way they were treated by men of royalty in the pagan kingdom of Persia to the east.<sup>28</sup> Whether the

27. Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1162A, cited by Lewis in *Allegory* 4-5.

28. Note the treatment of Queen Vashti in Est. 1:10-22; the whole selection and grooming process for the potential queens in the harem in chapter 2; and the practice of audience with the golden sceptre in 4:10-11 and 5:1-2.

statement addressed to women given in marriage to the king of Israel, 'Forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty' (Ps 45:10-11), shows that Israelite monarchs had slipped to the same standard will depend partly on whether more than one wife is so addressed and also partly on the concept of 'beauty' in view. Another intriguing question in the Psalms is how far David's expression of longing and desire for God and his presence is similar to the desire of true lovers (and friends?) for one another's company. God's love constantly recalls him; Israel's heart 'is not true to God'; 'the righteous cleaves to him in love' - these and similar phrases recall the picture of the true devotion, desire and commitment of married love (see, *e.g.*, Ps. 78:8, 37; 84:2; 91:14).

#### *E. Marriage and God's Covenant Love in the Prophets*

The roots of the parallel drawn between God's love and human love in marriage lie in the Old Testament concept of the Covenant. The parallel is first delineated explicitly by Hosea, the poignancy of whose loving dealings with Gomer, his unfaithful wife (possibly even a cult prostitute), is used to bring home to faithless Israel the constant love of Yahweh (see Hosea 1-3). This parallel between the human love relationship of marriage and Yahweh's covenant with Israel is relieved of any possibility of being misunderstood in a sexual sense by Hosea's fulminations against the sexual elements, rites and excesses at the idolatrous shrines in Israel (especially Ho. 4-9). Both in Hosea and in the other prophets who take up and develop his application of the marriage picture to Yahweh and Israel (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Malachi), the point that is repeatedly stressed is Israel's (and then Judah's) terrible faithlessness contrasted with Yahweh's freely given and constant love.<sup>29</sup> אִמּוּנָה ('loyal covenant love') and חֶסֶד

29. On the marriage picture in other prophets see *e.g.*, Is. 5:1-7; 49:20-21; 54:1ff., and 5ff., 57; 62:1-5; 66:7ff.; Je. 2:2ff., 23-25, 32-33; 3:1ff.; 13:25-27; 18:13-15; 31:21-22; La. 1:8-9. On Ezekiel and Malachi, see further below.

('faithfulness') are what God requires and yet are sadly lacking in Israel.<sup>30</sup> Clearly these are the qualities also highly to be desired and praised in human married love, as Malachi stresses so strongly. Judah is berated for her faithlessness both in the divine covenant and in the human marriage covenant. 'The Lord was witness to the covenant between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, although she is your companion and your wife by covenant. . . I hate divorce . . . so take heed. . . and do not be faithless' (Mal. 2:10-17; 3:5).

The prophets stress the free and generous commitment of Yahweh in love, conveying his total acceptance of Israel despite some naturally unattractive features in her; this love calls for an equally committed love in response, which will never look back from the time of betrothal or around at other 'lovers'. Israel's and Judah's wayward emotions are the sign of a spiritually diseased state but are certainly not an excuse for the wavering and weakness of her will (Is. 1:4-6; Ho. 4:12; 5:4; 10:2). Ezekiel develops this theme most movingly in chapter 16 where Jerusalem is depicted as Yahweh's unfaithful bride and wife, whom he had found abandoned and, out of pity, saved from an early death; he then betrothed her in covenant to himself, washed, cleansed, beautified and adorned her, only to have her squander her beauty and despise his love by playing the harlot and, even worse, by paying her lovers!<sup>31</sup> The picture of Oholah and Oholibah in chapter 23 reinforces the same point,<sup>32</sup> both chapters developing the betrothal, marriage, unfaithfulness, repudiation and judgement parallels through the use of physical sexual imagery. In keeping with the Bible's condemnation of both fornication and adultery (as well as harlotry), the passages condemn any doting on paramours by marriage partners and also any unchastity in youth which allowed the 'lewdness' of

30. See, *e.g.*, Ho. 4:1; 5:7; 6:4-7; 14:4; Is. 1:21,26.

31. Ezk. 16:1-34, on Judah's history; 16:35ff., on the judgement coming.

32. Ezk. 23:1-21 gives the history of Israel's and Judah's unfaithfulness; 23:22-49, the judgements.

physical intimacies and uncovering that should be reserved for marriage (Ezk. 16:23-24; 23:17-21). We could hardly be further removed from the mistaken identification of romantic love with something to be enjoyed in relationships outside marriage. God had given Israel and Judah no grounds for such conduct, since he had shown her nothing but the most generous, committed and considerate love, and had bestowed much beauty upon her in his love. Her whole life should have been one long love affair, or shared relationship of love, enjoyed with her divine husband - but her heart, head and whole body, were diseased and so her will, emotions and understanding were all astray (see Is. 1:4-6; Je. 5:23; Ho. 10:2).

#### F. *The Old Testament Wisdom Books and Poetry*

##### 1. *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament we discover again the keynote of creation and its goodness more than that of covenant love. It is in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs that the delights of love and marriage are celebrated most loudly, and that some of the sternest warnings against the pitfalls are also sounded, to steer people away from the counterfeit and the second best. All the devices that the 'strange', 'foreign', 'foolish' or 'evil' woman (whether prostitute or adulteress) uses to ensnare foolish men are mentioned there, from the eyelashes to special perfumes, alluring dress, smooth, seductive and persuasive speech, and even special bed-linen - truly there is nothing new under the sun!<sup>33</sup> Isaiah denounced similar attitudes and characteristics among many of the daughters of Jerusalem in his day (Is. 3:16-4:1). The way to the loose woman's house is a delusive path compared with the call, love and path of true wisdom, and its end is death, disease, misery and judgement.

33. Pr. 2:16ff.; 5:3ff.; 6:23-25; 7:10-21; 9:1; Ec. 1:9-10. Presumably the term 'strange' or 'foreign' woman may indicate either that most harlots in Israel were in fact of foreign extraction (possibly from the looser moral background of paganism, or perhaps sometimes finding it difficult to make a living in Israel), or that their ways were foreign to the behaviour and ways of Israel and Yahweh.

'Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? . . . Do not desire her beauty in your heart', warns Proverbs.<sup>34</sup> This is one false and blind alley, but Solomon took another, the multiplying of wives and concubines and 'pleasure'. That too yielded him no lasting satisfaction, the preacher reveals in Ecclesiastes, and was vanity and like chasing the wind (Ec. 2:1, 7-11). And in the Song of Songs the sixty queens and eighty concubines are contrasted with the unique joy and delight of the beloved who proclaims 'My dove, my perfect one, is only one' (Ct. 6:8-9).

It is the possibility of happiness and delight in the love of the faithful couple in marriage which is extolled by the wisdom writers repeatedly, and for which the imagined delights of the encounter with loose women or the copious harem are a poor and illusory substitute. Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes recognises that there is strength, support and warmth in two persons being together rather than one on his or her own, but that there is a time to embrace and a time not to (Ec. 4:9-12; 3:5). Then he counsels, 'Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which God has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life' (Ec. 9:9). The writer of Proverbs goes further, after counselling people to keep away from the strange woman: 'Let (your springs) be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you. Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely hind, a graceful doe. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times, be intoxicated (or ravished) always with her love'.<sup>35</sup> The sheer delight and joyful abandon of romantic love at the emotional and physical levels commended here is only possible, and only has God's approval, within the committed fidelity of marriage. And the passage goes on to stress that the Lord is watching - yes, in the bedroom a couple are in his presence - so that his approval is all-important, whereas the wicked die through indisciplined living (Pr. 5:21-23).

34. Pr. 6:25ff.; *cf.* 2:18-19; 5:7-14; 7:22-27; 9:13-18; 22:14; 23:27-28; Ec. 7:26.

35. Pr. 5:16-20. The earthy directness has been somewhat watered down by the RSV which changes 'breasts' to 'affection'.

Proverbs is male-oriented, written by a man for a man ('my son') to convey the wisdom of God (Pr. 4:1-4; 5:1; 6:1, 20; 18:22). Its writers know that to gain a wife is a good thing, a favour from the Lord. They are loud in singing the worth and praise of the good wife, who is not merely loving and affectionate, but gracious, prudent, extremely industrious in looking after her family, and a shrewd businesswoman (Pr. 12:4; 19:14; 31:10-31). It is typical of Scripture thus to combine the earthy and the romantic, or shared love and affection with absolutely practical considerations. In the end it is character that is the key. The misery of life with a contentious, quarrelsome or fretful partner (the 'nagging wife') is recognised, and also the disaster of marriage to someone who has been unloved.<sup>36</sup> The true understanding of beauty, as displayed by the wise, is well illustrated in Proverbs and is characteristic of the whole of Scripture. The seductress has beauty of a sort (outward only), but it is dangerous and incongruous, for 'a beautiful woman without discretion is like a gold ring in a pig's snout' (Pr. 6:25; 11:22). Again, concerning the good wife whose price is far above rubies, we hear 'Charm is deceptive, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates'. Incidentally, husbands are expected to praise their wives generously when they are devoted to their families - 'Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all' (Pr. 31:28-31). Perhaps this is simply the corollary of the earlier statement: 'Better is open rebuke than hidden love' (Pr. 27:5); for love in Scripture is meant to be expressed and shared. To return to beauty, Scripture is never afraid to describe a woman as 'beautiful', 'lovely' or 'fair to behold', or a man as good-looking and handsome, for true beauty is from the Lord and is his creation and gift ('He has made everything beautiful in its time'<sup>37</sup>). But the most

36. Pr. 17:1, 14; 19:13; 21:9, 19; 25:24; 27:15-16; 30:23.

37. Ec. 3:11; *cf.* Gn. 12:11, 14; 24:16; 26:7; 28:17;  
1 Sa. 25:3; 2 Sa. 12:2; 13:1; 14:27.

important thing in God's eyes is the inward beauty and adornment of heart, spirit and character (*cf.* 1 Pet. 3:3-4), and what we do with whatever beauty God may have given us (Israel had sadly squandered and prostituted it, as we saw from Ezekiel 16 and 23 earlier; *cf.* Je. 4:30). These themes of Proverbs are also extensively illustrated in the apocryphal wisdom books, notably in Sirach (Ecclesiasticus).<sup>38</sup>

## 2. *The Song of Solomon*

One of the three or four things too wonderful for the writer of Proverbs to comprehend is 'the way of a man with a maiden' (Pr. 30:18-19), and to this theme and that of beauty in love is devoted the greatest love-poem in the world in the eyes of many, the Song of Solomon. Unlike Proverbs it is written from the woman's point of view more than from the man's. It is also one of the greatest literary puzzles in the world. Many theories have been advanced as to its nature, structure and interpretation, precisely who are the characters, what the setting, and what its purpose in Scripture. Despite its widespread popularity down the years in both Jewish and Christian interpretation, the view of the book as an allegory of the love relationship between God and Israel or between Christ and the Church (or the believer) must be firmly and unhesitatingly rejected, both as the main intention of the book and as a secondary exposition of it.<sup>39</sup> Doubtless certain features, ideas and statements in it can be used (with the wisdom of hindsight) to illustrate these prophetic and apostolic parallels, but the book neither claims to be such an allegory nor has it any of the classic hallmarks of that class of writing. Moreover, the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel is not a theme of the wisdom literature or 'the Writings' in general, which use love and marriage imagery only in terms of responding and cleaving to

38. See Sir. 9:1-9; 18:30; 19:2; 25:1-2, 13-23; 26:1-18; 36:21-27; *cf.* also Tob. 4:12.

39. The history of this line of interpretation is a commentary on the world's bad conscience about sexual and physical love which has infected the church, in addition to a more general tendency to allegorize Scripture.

wisdom as the soul's true love, not in terms of the covenant of grace.<sup>40</sup> We also reject the view which regards the book as a series of unconnected poems about love, as being both unnecessary and contrary to some of the Song's own interconnecting features (refrains, repetitions of speakers, etc.). However one sees the main characters and however one reconstructs the plot in detail<sup>41</sup> one's conclusions do not in fact greatly affect the major emphases and lessons of the book on the theme of romantic love.<sup>42</sup>

As D. D. Williams says: 'We can (with Karl Barth) be glad that the Song of Songs is in Scripture, not as a cryptogram of theological meaning, but as the love song of man and woman'.<sup>43</sup> The Song is a celebration of true love between a young man and young woman in all its emotional intensity and physical and personal delight, in a way which extols both the one-to-one principle (which marriage proclaims) as against polygamy or promiscuity, and the need for virginity to be preserved intact until the day when a girl is 'spoken for' in marriage (Ct. 5:9ff.; 6:8-9; 4:12; 8:8-10). God, religion and morality are never explicitly mentioned in the Song<sup>44</sup> which seems to handle sexuality and love as almost secular and 'profane' rather than mythologizing it with either religious or cultic meaning. Highly poetic imagery is combined with detailed and down-to-earth appreciations by the lovers

40. Pr. 1:20ff.; 3:13ff.; 4:4ff.; 7:4; 8:1ff., esp. v.17; compare 8:35 with 18:22; 9:1ff. Just as a faithful and good wife is the true love and satisfaction of man at the human level, so wisdom is at a higher level. The 'strange' woman is a false rival of both (see 2:16ff.; 5:1-6; 6:23-24; 7:4-5; 8:1-3 compared with 9:13-18). See also Wis. 8:1-16.
41. *E.g.*, as Solomon learning the meaning of true love in practice from his marriage with a Shunamite like Abishag; or his being refused by a country girl brought into his harem in favour of her chosen and dearly-loved shepherd-bridegroom; or as a country wedding depicting the young couple in poetic fashion as king and princess/queen.
42. The major features and emphases are well summed up by Archdeacon Aglen in his introduction to the book in C. J. Ellicott (ed.), *An Old Testament Commentary for English Readers*, Vol. IV (London: Cassell, 1897) 385-386.
43. Williams, *Love* 235.
44. God is mentioned only in a poetic metaphor

of each other's entire bodies and being (Ct. 4:1-7; 5:10-16; 7:1-9). Here is beauty and sensitivity without crudity. As elsewhere in Scripture, human sexuality is healthily and naturally accepted and is neither deified nor despised. Associated with it and with true human romantic love are ideas of goodness, playfulness, the beautiful spring countryside, and dreams (whether by day or by night). But as Schillebeeckx points out, there is no frivolity; the Song ends in a bridal feast; 'great value is placed on the virgin state of the beloved', and true love, which cannot be bought (even by Solomon), is expressed as unshakeable fidelity ('for love is as strong as death'). 'The Song forms a healthy counterpart to the other Old Testament tendency to see the function of marriage almost exclusively as the perpetuation of the clan and nation. It extols not fertility. . . but human love.'<sup>45</sup> It forms an idyllic commentary on what the creation account of Genesis 2 has to say about the man-woman relationship. The wonder at the beauty of the beloved's body is quite free and unashamed, and the English versions' somewhat improbable translation of שר as 'navel' in 7:2 (Hb. 7:3) disguises the full extent of unembarrassed detail in the man's appreciation of and delight at his bride's physical attraction.<sup>46</sup> However, the parallelism of 'friend' and 'lover' in 5:1 and 5:16 stresses that the physical is not the only level in view, and 5:16 states that the beloved is 'altogether desirable'. The words used for beauty and loveliness in the book underline the fact that it is inward beauty as well as outward that is being praised: e.g., no, - beauty of outward form; נעם - inward beauty; lovely, pleasant, tender-hearted, delightful; נאה -inward and outward beauty; comely, lovely, befitting, seemly.<sup>47</sup> We hear arepeated

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adjectivally in 8:6, and by implication is possibly referred to in 7:1.

45. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage* 27-31 (quotations from p. 30).  
 46. Cf. O. L. Barnes, *The Song of Songs* (Newcastle: Progressive, 1961), Appendix 2, p. 10. BDB, 1057, gives 'vulva' as a common interpretation. On the 'Shepherd-lover' interpretation of Ewald and others, these verses form part of Solomon's praising of the girl's form, and are hence regarded by some as intemperate. Yet here too the poetry is not crude, but beautiful.  
 47. יפה in Ct. 1:8,15 (twice), 16; 2:10, 13; 4:1 (twice), 7, 10; 5:9; 6:1, 4, 10; 7:2,7; נעם in 1:16; 7:7; נאה in 1:5,10; 2:14; 4:3; 6:4. See Barnes, *Song of Songs*, Appendix 4.

request to the daughters of Jerusalem that they 'stir not up nor awaken love until it please', which is probably best understood as a warning of the undesirability of premature or artificial stimulation of either romantic love or sexual passion (Ct. 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). Mutual belonging and glad self-giving are rejoiced in by the couple: 'My beloved is mine and I am his'. Finally, this love - 'a most vehement flame' - can survive many floods and waters which cannot quench or drown it, and is as strong as death, and as inexorable as Sheol (Ct. 2:16; 6:3; 8:6-7). Its very nature is to commit itself to lifelong fidelity.

Intoxication, feeling sick with love, dreaming of the beloved - this is the stuff of which romantic love is made in every culture. But it seems clear that in the Song we are seeing love and passion at their most ardent as well as at their truest, precisely because we see passionate love in a young bride and groom at the point of readiness for the consummation of marriage. Other parts of Scripture encourage us to think that within marriage faithful devotion to and delight in one another as whole persons ought to go on from strength to strength all through life, but the all-conquering intensity of passion, with its dreaming and lovesickness as here witnessed, could hardly be expected to do so. It must be held in perspective with all the other dimensions and purposes of marriage, the family and social life. Although romantic love and passion may be expressed politically - even lyrically - in the Bible, as here in the Song, yet it is generally firmly anchored in reality, not fantasy. (The dreams of the bride in the Song are about a real relationship, be it noted.) Fully aware of the dangers as well as the delights of passionate love, Scripture balances the poetry of the Song with the guidance, encouragement and warnings of the wise, the wiser purposes of marriage envisaged from creation, the disciplined regulation of the law, the covenant illustrations of the prophets, and the transforming love of God in Christ as the external and internal dynamic of relationships in a godly life.

It is small wonder that some, like Charles Williams, have sought to construct out of true romantic love's vision and self-giving abandon, a whole understanding and theology of reality and human life

based on Christian presuppositions and principles.<sup>48</sup> Statements like 'Your love is better than wine' are perhaps not altogether unrelated to the New Testament's charge to be filled with the Holy Spirit and then to overflow in the loving praise of God rather than be drunk with wine (Ct. 1:1-2; 4:10; Eph. 5:18-19; Acts 2:12-17). There is room in both Old and New Testament for an ecstatic element in love for God and one's beloved, but this is never divorced from the moral and rational dimension. In view of the way the allegorical interpretation of the Song has used the ardour of romantic love as a picture of the believer's love for Christ, the question ought to be asked whether Scripture ever draws such a comparison. The only point of any such parallel (note, *e.g.*, 'You have lost your first love', Rev. 2:4; 'You are lukewarm', Rev. 3:16) is to highlight the ardour and enthusiasm of selfless devotion in one's first love rather than to suggest the need for a particular emotionally high state, and it certainly has nothing of eroticism in it at all. This is the true perspective, that of self-giving devotion and interdependence to which Charles Williams also seeks to lead his readers from his consideration of the true vision and images of romantic love. The practice in some of the mystical traditions of applying physical and erotic imagery to the worship of Christ or God finds no support in the Bible, and is a by-way fraught with danger.

### III THE NEW TESTAMENT

#### A. *Christ and the Church*

When we reach the NT, the OT prophetic parallel between the divine and human covenant relationship and marriage is maintained, but now it is Jesus Christ who is the bridegroom and the Church who is his bride. Except for two places the noun γάμος is always used

48. See Mary M. Shideler's fine study, *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (New York: Harper, 1962). Williams seeks to draw out the meaning of romantic love and romantic experiences. His approach is essentially Platonist in method, but Christian in its objectives and in the understanding of love to which he seeks to lead his readers.

in the NT in connection with the Kingdom or the marriage of Christ and the redeemed.<sup>49</sup> The imagery of the bridegroom and the wedding feast used by Jesus in some of the parables (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-10; *cf.* 9:14-15) is developed in the Apocalypse with its picture of the gaudy Babylonian harlot contrasted with the radiant woman who is the bride of the Lamb. The OT prophetic theme is here transmuted into NT terms and relationships and presented in apocalyptic style, the culmination being the marriage supper of the Lamb, the coming of the bridegroom, and the appearing of the bride in all her glory as the holy city (Rev. 12:1-6; 17:1-19:9; 21:1ff.; 22:12, 17, 20). It is left to Paul in Ephesians 5 to develop most closely the parallel between the love of the heavenly bridegroom and his bride and the love of human husbands and wives for each other, in order to illuminate the human relationships within marriage (Eph. 5:21-33). Paul shows (1 Cor. 7) that he is well aware of the reality of sexual love and the strength of the flame which burns in it (1 Cor. 7:9), and elsewhere he denounces the denial of the goodness of married love as a demonic doctrine (1 Tim. 4:1-5). But in the context of the whole marriage relationship it is the self-giving sacrificial love of Christ for his body, the Church, which is to show the way for husbands to love their wives as their own bodies and which will elicit the wife's loving response of loyalty and respect for her husband as her head (in the Lord). Warm cherishing, under care and nurture - the measure of this self-giving, outgoing love is sacrifice for the sake of the person loved. Only such a love will bring the cleansing, holy beauty, perfecting and wholeness of character to any spouse or couple, which is God's will in the mysterious one-flesh union of marriage (Eph. 5:22-33). Growth into deeper wholeness and perfection through married love is what God intends. It is only within the inspiration and control of such mutual love that the personal levels of the union, including the romantic side, will yield the satisfaction and glory which are otherwise impossible. As C. S. Lewis points out, without this divine love to back it and strengthen it, romantic love by itself will never be able to fulfill the great promises its vision holds out to men and women.<sup>50</sup>

49. The exceptions are Jn. 2:1-2 and Heb. 13:4.

50. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Collins, 1963) 102-106.

What Paul is doing in Ephesians 5 is applying to the marriage relationship the second great commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself', in the light of the Lord's new commandment to 'love one another as I have loved you' (Mk. 12:31; Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12, 17; 1 Jn. 2:7-11). He is also showing his readers the practical application of the understanding of love expounded in 1 John 4, the divine love which men begin to understand only through the propitiatory death of Christ, but which then comes into their lives to control and inspire their relations with one another (1 Jn. 4:7-13, 16-21). So to the two OT controlling key ideas of creation and covenant, the NT forces us to add a third - Calvary - to help us to understand the meaning of true love between man and woman.

### B. *New Testament Terminology*

In the LXX the principal Hebrew term for love (אהבה) is mostly translated by ἀγαπάω, a fairly colourless word for love in non-biblical Greek, meaning 'to be fond of, treat with respect, be pleased with'. This term and its cognate noun ἀγάπη take on a particular significance in the NT because they are used especially of the self-giving redemptive love of God in Christ and of man's love as inspired by this. These are the distinctive NT and Christian words for love, because it is a distinctive kind of love which is being spoken of. H. Thielicke notes that the NT never uses ἀγάπη/ἀγαπᾶν in anything other than personal terms; you can love only persons (the words are not used of ideas, principles, norms or values, or things at all).<sup>51</sup> Φιλέω/φίλος/φιλία (denoting affection, friendship, love) and στέργω/στοργή (denoting instinctive natural affection as between parents and children) also occur in the NT (the latter root only in compound forms). Extremely striking, by contrast, is the total absence of the ἐράω/ἔρωσ word-group which constituted the distinctive Greek terms to describe sexual love, especially the passionate love between a man and a woman, marked by craving and longing desire. (These latter words were also used in the mystery religions in a religious sense of attraction to and striving after union with a god, and by Plato in a philosophical sense of striving after righteousness,

51. Thielicke, *Ethics* 29-31.

wisdom and the good).<sup>52</sup> The NT deliberately avoids them, presumably because they were considered semantically debased coinage - vulgar ἔρωσ because of its link with a view of love based entirely on sexual desire and attraction (often misunderstood or perverted) and with the figure of Eros as a divine inspirer and even compeller of men and women, which actually had far more of the demonic than of the divine in it; and mystical/philosophical ἔρωσ, for other reasons connected with the theology of salvation, which need not concern us here.<sup>53</sup>

When, therefore, the New Testament tells husbands to love (ἀγαπᾶτε) their wives, it does so not because it disapproves of any sexual attraction and delight each may find in the other (or its enjoyment and expression in the right context) but because it has a higher concept of love as self-giving and as commitment to the blessing and well-being of another. In Christ this elevated view of love is seen as being meant to inspire and as needed to control all forms of human relationships, including marriage, family, parenthood, work, church and community.<sup>54</sup> (The NT has other words for desire [e.g., ἐπιθυμία, ὄρεξις] but it will not endow with the name of 'love' anything that may turn out to be merely self-centred desire, and it leaves ἔρωσ on one side for this reason).

### C. *Desire - Right and Wrong*

Otto Piper writes: 'Sexual love, like all other forms, is a search after true love. Given that, sexual sympathy is in itself only a pointer to, and a symbol of,

52. Much of this paragraph summarizes the discussion by W. Gunther and H. G. Link of 'Love' in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown) (Exeter: Paternoster, 1976), Vol. 2, 538ff. Note also that ἐράω and ἐρωτίς are used only once each to translate אהב in the LXX. Ἀγαπάω is also used in the LXX to translate רצה, חם, and חפץ.
53. On this whole subject see A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1932); Williams, *Love*, chapter 4; O. O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (London: Yale University Press, 1980); and M. C. D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber & Faber, second edition, 1954).
54. See, e.g., Eph. 4:17-6:9; Col. 3:12-4:1; 1 Jn. 4:7-5:3. For an attempt to work out the relationships between σπορή, φιλία, ἔρωσ and ἀγάπη from a

true love'.<sup>55</sup> Is this not what Jesus was telling the woman of Samaria who had had five husbands but so desperately needed the living water to quicken an eternal spring of love within her (Jn. 4:13-18)? Sometimes the NT suggests that ἐπιθυμία is what is wrong with the world, for in 2 Peter 1:4 the aim of God's promises in Christ is depicted as being 'that through these you may escape the corruption that is in the world through lust' (ἐπιθυμία). This term, frequently used in the NT to mean selfish desire or passion, 'expresses the deeply rooted tendency in man to find the focus of his life in himself, to trust himself, and to love himself more than others', and certainly rather than God. The lust of fallen man (or of 'the flesh' or 'the mind') finds expression in every direction - sex, material enjoyment, power, possessions, men's praise and so on.<sup>56</sup> Yet the Bible nowhere condemns the sexual and emotional needs of man which find expression in emotional or sexual desires as such, but only their indisciplined misdirection, abuse or disproportion in the person not submitted to the will of God nor ruled by his love. In other words, men being 'lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God', indulge their desires (whether good or evil in themselves) for their own self-gratification (1 Tim, 3:1-5). But the Psalmist promised man: 'Delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart' (Ps. 37:4). True love between man and woman can include desire (for the whole person and for complete union): 'He is altogether desirable'; 'I am my beloved's and his desire is for me' (Ct. 5:16; 7:10). It is doubtful whether the phrase in Genesis 3:16, 'Your desire shall be for your husband', indicates the actual curse on the woman. It is rather that the desire will continue but will now lead to pain in childbearing and domination by the man. A good example of the middle course along which Scripture tries to steer us is provided by the apocryphal book of Tobit (however strange it may appear in other respects), where, before

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Christian standpoint, see Lewis, *The Four Loves* and also (in parts) E. W. Hirst, *Studies in Christian Love* (London: SCM, 1944).

55. *The Christian Interpretation of Sex* (London: Nisbet, 1942) 77.  
 56. H. Schönweiss, 'Desire' in *NIDNTT*, Vol. 1, 456-458 (quotation from p. 457).

the marriage of the young Tobias and Sarah is consummated, he prays with her in the bedroom. After a reference to God's intentions in making Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 he says, 'So I do not take my sister from any lustful motive; I do it in singleness of heart. Be kind to have pity on her and on me and bring us to old age together' (Tob. 8:7). The whole perspective of marriage is kept in view by the God-fearing couple.

E. Schillebeeckx argues that in the OT אהבה is a love impelled by violent and voluntary desire for reference, and so marriage originated in a spontaneous feeling or desire, led on to definite choice, and was regulated by a covenant established in חסד.<sup>57</sup> Under the biblical arranged marriage system, however, the order would have had to be reversed some of the time, and love was expected to grow and is thought to have been enjoined upon the couple in the wedding charge.<sup>58</sup> The commitment of the will and the whole person was involved. If we ask the question, 'How can you work up love as a feeling?', the answer must presumably be that you cannot. But by God's blessing love was expected to flourish between man and wife. The NT tells us that a couple have a duty in this (as in other relationships) to maintain the openness and vulnerability as well as the care and consideration of ἀγάπη towards one another, and to refuse to give any ground in the heart to malice, bitterness and the many other things which can dam up the springs of love.<sup>59</sup> In Scripture only jealousy and anger have both a positive and a negative sense. A husband or wife has the right and in some ways the duty to be jealous of the partner's exclusive commitment and faithfulness in love, as God is of his people's.<sup>60</sup> But

57. Schillebeeckx, *Marriage* 64.

58. I have seen this stated in various places, but have not found a clear example in biblical times. It may be thought to be implied in the marriage contract or covenant which was drawn up (as in Tob. 7:13) or in the blessing, or it may be an inference from later practice. It is certainly in line with apostolic thinking in the NT.

59. *E.g.*, Eph. 5:22-33 in the light of 4:31-5:2. *Cf.* Rom. 12:9-10; 13:8-10; Col. 3:8-14, 18-19.

60. Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Nu. 5; Ezk. 16:42; 23:25; Zc. 1:14; 8:2.

woe betide the man or woman who gives a married man cause to be jealous in another OT sense; that person will suffer the judgment of God under the OT law of jealousy or the just anger of an enraged and wronged spouse or family, as in Proverbs and the history books.<sup>61</sup>

*D. Other New Testament themes*

The NT also continues many other OT strands of teaching on love and marriage, although (as has already been shown) the whole is transformed for the believer by the experience and way of God's ἀγάπη in Christ and the ensuing parallel between Christ and the Church already noted. There is full recognition of the power of sexual attraction and of the sexual and emotional needs of men and women, for which marriage is God's provision, subject always to the overarching claims of the kingdom and the Lord (see, e.g., Paul in 1 Cor. 7). There is ample evidence of the disastrous results when the passion of mere lust is surrendered to, both in the pagan world and also at times in Christian people, often through the work of false teachers who are corrupt in heart and morals themselves.<sup>62</sup> Hence Jesus' stress on the heart as the source of wrong in this regard and its need to be cleansed and renewed in the power of a different kind of love (Mt. 12:33-35; 15:15-20; Jn. 3:3-6). Paul recognises that the actual reason behind the pagan world's surrender to licentiousness, lasciviousness and uncleanness of every kind is that its members have become callous or past feeling and even devoid of natural affection. This is due to the inevitable hardness of heart which overtakes people who have turned away from their Creator as the goal of worship and the source of true love, direction and understanding, and who in ignorance crave satisfaction from (and so offer worship-like service to the creatures rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18-32; Eph. 4:17-19; Tit. 2:12; 3:3). Paul exhorts those who have put on the new man in Jesus Christ to follow him and his Father in being kind, tenderhearted and forgiving, to walk in self-giving love, and hence to shun immorality and all impurity (Eph. 4:20-24; 4:31-5:6; Col. 3:5-14). This

61. Nu. 5; Pr. 6:34-35; Gn. 34, 38, 39; 2 Sa. 13.

62. 1 Cor. 5:1ff.; 6:12ff.; 2 Pet, 2; Jude 4ff.; Rev. 2:14, 20ff.

is the background to his instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians and Colossians, and a similar exhortation also follows immediately on Peter's instructions to husbands and wives (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; *cf.* vv. 8ff.).

Peter and Paul also agree in mentioning 'honour' as an important ingredient in the relationship between husband and wife (as indeed between all Christian people in their relationships to those around them), and the author of Hebrews wants marriage 'held in honour' and the marriage-bed undefiled (Eph. 5:21,33; 1 Pet. 2:17; 3:1-2,7; Heb. 13:4). The complete contrast between the pagan world and the Christian way is nowhere presented more clearly than by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4, where each Christian is told to 'possess his vessel (*i.e.*, body) in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God' (1 Thess. 4:1-8). The concept of regarding and treating with honour, respect and reverence is applied by NT writers to the human body, to sexuality, to marriage itself, and to one's marriage partner, whether wife or husband. The importance of committed fidelity is emphasized just as strongly as in the Old Testament by Jesus himself and the NT writers, who firmly reject any easy-going attitude to divorce whilst showing recognition of at least some unbearable situations which may make the continuance of a marriage impossible in practice (Mt. 5:31-32; 19:3-12; 1 Cor. 7:10-16, 39-40).

#### IV GENERAL BIBLICAL CONSIDERATIONS

##### A. *Male headship*

In both Testaments it is generally the man who is the initiator and leader in the relationship and the woman who is the responder, both in courtship and the arranging of marriages and within the marriage relationship.<sup>63</sup> A similar situation obtains in the relationship

63. There are exceptions (as with Naomi and Ruth planning the approach to Boaz) but this is the general position. The OT woman is always under the authority and leadership of either a father or a husband (see, *e.g.*, Nu, 30 - the law on vows - if a woman made one, either her father or her husband could revoke it when he learned of it). The NT position on marriage continues the headship of the man.

between God and Israel and between Christ and the Church.<sup>64</sup> This is doubtless accentuated by the place and lifestyle of women in society then, but the instances where a woman tried to initiate something in Scripture are usually attempts to ensnare and inveigle the man, as in the case of Potiphar's wife with Joseph, Delilah with Samson, or the adulteress of Proverbs (Gn. 39:6ff.; Jdg. 16:4ff.; Pr. 7:10-23). The headship of the man grounded by Paul on Genesis 2 and 3 will no doubt receive different forms of expression in different ages. But it is seen in Scripture as part of woman's protection and in the NT as a headship to be exercised in love, as Christ loved the Church, rather than a 'lording it' over the wife (Eph. 5:25-33a; Col. 3:19). If expressed thus, it need not and should not prevent, but will rather foster, the intimate, devoted and lifelong partnership of two equal persons made and renewed in God's image as friends, lovers and parents, which Scripture holds before us as God's ideal from Genesis 2 onwards. (This is not of course to assert that the actual exercise of male headship always achieved this ideal in practice). It might also be mentioned in passing that there are only very occasional hints in Scripture<sup>65</sup> that the quality of the love between the parents in a marriage will have some relevance to the relationship and healthy development of the children as persons, but this is never made explicit, despite Jesus' warnings on the value and treatment of children.

#### B. *The Kingdom Priority*

We have observed three key ideas which control the Bible's attitudes to romantic love and marriage: creation (including its goodness and the concept of the image of God); the Covenant of grace; and Calvary and

64. God's grace is always prior, and man (whether in Israel or in the Church) is always the one who responds to him who first loved as (*cf.* 1 Jn. 4:9-10,19).
65. *E.g.*, in Pr. 30:23; Mal. 2:13-16; in the way that parent/child instructions immediately follow husband/wife teaching in Eph. 5 and Col. 3; and in the general view of relationships as being all of a piece (Godward and manward).

the ἀγάπη love it reveals. A fourth must be brought in to complete the picture, namely, the kingdom. For the needs and demands of the kingdom of God take precedence for its citizens over all other considerations, even in the sphere of love and marriage, not merely in demanding obedience to the moral law of God but also in the matter of one's vocation. Jesus, following the example of prophets like Elijah, Jeremiah and John the Baptist, renounced marriage for himself while showing his approval of it in general.<sup>66</sup> Some, he declared, become eunuchs - *i.e.*, renounce marriage - for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 19:10-12). Paul likewise envisaged some Christians remaining single like himself for similar reasons, others refusing to remarry, and married couples sometimes abstaining from physical sexual relations for the sake of a season of prayer. Yet he also recognised, as Christ had before him, that a person had to be equipped by God's gift and calling to remain single, which state is everywhere seen as the exception rather than the rule (1 Cor. 7:1-9, 25-28, 32-38, 40).<sup>67</sup> Moreover, just as the taking of foreign wives or marrying foreign husbands outside the covenant was forbidden in the OT, so Paul declares that under the new covenant the Christian is free to marry 'only in the Lord'.<sup>68</sup> Man and wife living in love under his lordship enjoy a spiritual fellowship or partnership together in his service (like

66. By going to a wedding and its feast at Cana; by his use of it as a picture of the kingdom of heaven; and by his direct teaching on it (*e.g.*, in Mk. 10:2-12).
67. Hebrew had no word for 'bachelor', although the occasional single adult person is found in the OT. The prophets also sometimes had to submit their natural inclinations in marriage to the requirements of the message they were charged to proclaim in the name of Yahweh - witness the naming of Isaiah's children (Is. 7:3; 8:1-4), or the forbidding of Ezekiel to show grief over the death of his dearly loved wife (Ezk. 24:15-27).
68. 1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor, 6:14ff. *Cf.* Ex. 34:11-16; Dt. 7:3; Ne. 10:28-30; 13:23-27, on intermarriage with the people of the land. But Dt. 21:10-14 was the one concession made otherwise.

Aquila and Priscilla), and are 'fellow-heirs of the grace of life' (Acts 18:26 etc.; 1 Pet. 3:7). Further, while the kingdom and love of God are eternal, marriage and the romantic love which is peculiar to it are not (Mt. 22:30).

### *C. Courtship*

Courtship as such is not treated at great length in Scripture, partly due to the arranged marriage system. It gives the example of 'love at first sight' in the case of Jacob for Rachel - a love which was willing to serve seven years for the privilege of winning her as his bride and which made those seven years seem only a few days (Gn. 29:18-20). True love is prepared to be patient in face of the promised joy. The Bible's simple statement is 'Jacob loved Rachel' (Gn. 29:18). It never uses our phrase 'falling in love', with its pagan overtones, since to be in love is not a step down, let alone a fall, in biblical terms. It is only indulgence in lust and failure to love that are signs of fallenness. 'Jacob loved Rachel' is a happier statement than Samson's about the Philistine woman he had seen: 'I saw one of the daughters of the Philistines at Timnah; now get her for me as my wife. . . for she pleases me well' - a request persisted in despite his parents' godfearing(?) protest at her not being one of his own people (Jdg. 14:1-3). The subsequent history seems to show that parents often knew better than their headstrong young offspring in those days too. The relationship was a disaster from first to last (Jdg. 14:10-15:8). How differently Jacob went about acquiring a wife from his own kin, following his parents' suggestions: (Gn. 28:1-5; 29:15ff.). The story of Abraham's sending to find a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24 is a fine picture of the trust in the providence of the Lord shown by Abraham and by his servant, who went about it in accordance with their knowledge of God's will and with prayer, using an intelligent test of character at the well. Isaac probably accepted Rebekah the more immediately and readily because the servant took care to tell him how it all happened (Gn. 24:1-9, 12-15, 26-27, 40, 50-52, 66). There is no detailed pattern for a modern courtship here, but there are abiding principles of perspective, motive, prayer and faith. The Song of Songs also shows that the OT was well acquainted with the full range of emotions aroused by courtship and the prospect of entry into married love.

Courtship is never directly treated in the NT, but in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives instructions relating to how one is to treat 'his virgin'. This is best understood as addressed to fathers about a daughter promised to a man in marriage or a daughter wanting to marry. There is clear recognition here that an inordinately long waiting period may put a severe strain on the couple concerned, and that hence they should marry, even though on other grounds Paul specially commends the single state in the particular circumstances of the time (1 Cor. 7:36-38).

Neither Testament lays down a set of pettifogging rules as to how courtship is to be conducted, as to what precisely may or may not go on in love-play and endearments between husband and wife, or as to their detailed role-assignments. Rather we find great abiding principles with a few concrete examples from a particular age and cultural context, leaving many of the most intimate matters for lovers to discover and work out together in marriage. With regard to courtship, the most Scripture can do for a very different age and cultural context like our own, with different marriage customs and patterns of family life, is to hold before us its examples of courtesy, patient restraint and the proper and healthy perspectives of faith and love, balanced by a realistic understanding of human nature, both its needs and its weaknesses; secondly, to point up the value and importance of the guidance and support of the family and the wider community; thirdly, to hold up the mirror of a different way of doing things to our own age and society, to make us re-examine our customs, warning us for instance that betrothal or engagement should be seen as a very serious and deeply committing step; and fourthly, to give us a far deeper controlling concept of love as ἀγάπη to undergird all our interpersonal relations.

## V CONCLUSION

In seeking to review biblical attitudes towards romantic love between the sexes, we have observed various emphases, in some cases held side by side from the earliest times (as in Genesis 1 and 2). We have found now one aspect to the fore in relation to marriage, now another (*e.g.*, now joy in the goodness of God's creation, now covenant faithfulness). We have found various distortions and deviations practised by men and women and have even sometimes questioned how far cultural moulds allowed the fulfilment of some of the

biblical ideals. Development there certainly was in both the Old and the New Testament, particularly in the light of salvation history. Yet in principle we find no inherent contradiction between the different strands and emphases encountered in the Bible. Rather it is a question of a whole perspective emerging through counter-balancing themes.

In Scripture God addresses himself to men and women in the concrete relationships of life (as husbands/wives, parents/children, etc.), in the world of reality, rather than in some supposedly 'spiritual' relationship or in a world of fantasy.<sup>69</sup> The Bible, and God who speaks to man through its words, is concerned with relationships rather than with experiences for their own sake. In its approach to romantic love, Scripture is at times lyrically poetic yet always intensely practical. In a world where confusion about romantic love is widespread, God's word is a word of wholesomeness, balance, clarity and perspective. Marriage has other ends in view besides the interpersonal love and growth of the two partners, but it includes this as a major part. Romantic love is always to be directed towards marriage, experienced in relation to it as its goal and focus, and enjoyed to the full within it, in a committed partnership of love, complementarity, mutual attraction, delight, devotion, care, respect and fidelity. To look in other directions for the enjoyment of romantic love is to court harmful snares and delusions. Sexuality is part of God's good creation, part of the personality of man and woman made in his own image. It is to be accepted as just that, happily, responsibly and unashamedly, and is not to be made a subject either of disdain or of obsessive fascination, so as to become either despised or deified. Scripture dethrones and purifies it by 'demythologizing' it and contextualizing it properly, so that it is no longer either an all-commanding god to be worshipped or a maddening demon to

69. This is true in the OT (*e.g.*, Deuteronomy) and NT references given above. The only fantasy sanctioned in Scripture is the dream of the young woman in the Song of Solomon and her 'fancy', but this is in relation to her real beloved, not an imaginary relationship.

be feared.<sup>70</sup> It is to be enjoyed responsibly, but without losing the sense of innocent delight and play, lest it become deadening by the very over-earnestness with which it is approached. We notice, for instance, how Scripture combines the encouragement of public modesty of dress and behaviour with an emphasis on joyful and uninhibited abandon to one another inside marriage. To the theme of creation (its goodness, and divinely imaged persons) are added those of covenant and faithful devotion, the divine *agape*-love of Calvary which must permeate, inspire and direct the whole of life, and the call of the kingdom or rule of God in human life. According to Scripture man learns and finds his true fulfilment within the disciplined security of committed relationship, not by experimenting without it. 'The first principle of a Christian sex ethic is that this side of life should be so ordered, disciplined and released, that sexual love becomes a creative aspect of the life of agape, the giving of each person in service to God and neighbour'. This seems to be a true NT emphasis. Man is called by God in Christ to a life of *agape* in every dimension of living; sexuality, friendship, marriage, and the natural relationships of the family are some of the media or spheres of relationships within which the Christian is called to work this out at all levels of his life and being. *Agape* is love for persons at its truest, and it must be in control over *philia*, *storge* and *eros*, when these are shorn of the distortions inflicted on them by paganism. For they are meant to be three God-given channels through which *agape* will find expression in specific relationships of life. Only in Christ does this now become a real possibility for man. '(Human) sexuality is a dimension of personal existence within which the meaning of love is to be learned, and in which love between persons reaches a depth, intimacy and creativity of expression which is incomparable with most other loves.'<sup>71</sup> The Bible is

70. C. S. Lewis wrote: 'In ancient literature, love seldom rises above merry sensuality or domestic comfort, except to be treated as tragic madness, an ἄρη which plunges otherwise sane people into crime and disgrace' (*Allegory* 4).

71. Williams, *Love* 235 and 236.

clear that a marriage fired by truly *agape*-inspired romantic love is the proper and only adequate framework for this learning to be worked out to the full between man and woman, a love relationship which displays the renewing of God's image through a holy love which is from him, through him, and ultimately to his glory as man's creator and redeemer.