

The first wedding I ever attended was my own. Nothing previous in life had quite prepared me for that moment—or for the several months leading up to the vows. Sure, there were probing heart-to-heart talks with my future in-laws, and the prep-and-pep talks from friends in the clergy. Kimberly and I were both, after all, preparing for careers in the Presbyterian church, so we were always surrounded by eager counselors.

But, for me at least, the mad dash to matrimony was a completely new experience. No one had told me what to expect, and I had never seen it for myself. There were budgets to be drawn up, gowns to be measured, guest lists to be compiled, invitations to be sent, a hall to be booked, tuxes to be rented, and bridesmaids and groomsmen to be choreographed.

All this filled to overflowing two lives that had already seemed over-full. At the time of our engagement, we were serious students in challenging undergraduate programs, both preparing for graduate school and both very active in youth ministry. Who had time for wedding planning?

But, like the tides and the seasons, wedding plans are inexorable things, and we've all got to do what we've all got to do. So I let myself be directed by Kimberly, who had observed a few weddings during her teen years, and I abandoned myself to task after task. In those final weeks, whenever I wasn't sleeping, I was making phone calls, running errands, licking stamps, having something measured, or stating my color preference.

Still, I never got to the end of the to-do list. The day arrived, and I found myself standing at the front of the church, beside my best man, my mind still turning over a thousand details and loose ends.

That's when the processional music changed, and that's when I had the vision.

It wasn't quite a new heaven and a new earth, but it might as well have been. It was a new Kimberly. Or, rather, it was Kimberly as I had never seen her before. Her dress was white and seemingly radiant in the sunny church of a late-summer afternoon. But that's not what astonished me. It was her face, now beneath a veil. In all those months of preparation and decisions, I had never once seen even a photograph of her veil and gown; nor had I given them a thought. Yet now this vision struck me as something new and beautiful and deeply mysterious—something holy.

I was literally taken aback. I remember that I actually staggered.

For me it seemed that that very moment contained all of my life, all of history, and all of creation. And, in a sense, it did. The Bible tells us so.

## A Garden-Variety Love Story

I am not the first reader to note that the Bible is a book that tells a love story—the story of God's love for humankind. As if to emphasize the point, the Church arranged the Scriptures so that the biblical canon begins and ends with a wedding. In Genesis, the high point of the creation narrative is God's fashioning of man and woman, Adam and Eve, the primal two who become one flesh (Gen. 2:23–24). In John's apocalypse, Revelation, the culmination

is at the very end, in the seer's vision of heaven, which his angel guide describes as "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9)—the celebration of the communion of Christ and His Church.

In between those two events, a love story unfolds. But the drama depends so much upon that opening scene in Genesis that we should pause there for a moment and consider what took place.

It is a familiar sequence of events. God created Adam and gave him dominion over the garden of Eden. Genesis describes man's dominion in terms that, elsewhere in the Scriptures, are used to describe priestly duties. God places man in the garden "to till it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15); the Hebrew verbs rendered "till" and "keep" ('abodah and shamar) appear together elsewhere in the Pentateuch only to describe the priestly ministry of the Levites (see Num. 3:7–8, 8:26, 18:5–6). The Levites were to "serve" and "guard" the sanctuary, keeping it safe and pure from profanation. Adam was to do the same for the garden. Thus, God gave Adam all the world for his possession, and He charged him to preside over it all, not just with kingly dominion, but with priestly holiness.

Adam had dominion over creation. His possessions, however, were not enough to satisfy his human nature. God had made Adam to find completion outside himself and apart from his worldly goods: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18). Then God formed Eve from one of Adam's ribs, and He made her so well that Adam exclaimed, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Adam's vocation was to love, as God loves.

Yet his bliss was short-lived; for we immediately read the story of the deadly serpent, his empty promises, and Adam and Eve's violation of the only limit God had placed on their dominion: "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17).

We may see this not only as disobedience, but as fear and neglect as well. It was Adam's job, after all, to protect the garden sanctuary and keep it from profanation. It was his duty to protect

his bride. Yet, he failed by allowing the serpent to enter their home and begin his fearsome dialogue of temptation.

Adam's sin was pride; he disobeyed God and placed his own safety before his bride's. He failed to lay down his life to save hers. His was a failure of love, and so he proved incapable of living the divine life that God had intended to share with humanity. Moreover, Adam left his human family a legacy of dysfunction that cascaded down the generations—and the sign of this dysfunction, beginning in Genesis itself, is marital disarray. Sin expresses itself as polygamy (Gen. 4:19–24), incest (Gen. 19:31–38), and sodomy (Gen. 19:4–11). Eventually, the greatest sin of Israel's greatest king, David, would begin with adultery (2 Sam. 11:1–13). Solomon's polygamy would lead him to idolatry (1 Kings 11:1–9), as Abraham's practice of concubinage had led to horrific strife (Gen. 16:1–15; 21:8–21).

Still, though the primal catastrophe surely wounded nature, marriage remained a great good. And it remained God's favorite metaphor for His love for humankind. He cast His relationship with man in terms of covenant—a sacred bond of kinship sealed by a solemn oath. In the ancient world, covenant was the bond that formed families. Marriage was perhaps the most common form of covenant.

## Covenant or Contract?

It is important for us to get this right. But, in order to do so, we have to move beyond certain modern assumptions and retrieve the sense of covenant as it was lived in biblical cultures—and not only in the Hebrew and Christian religious cultures, but also in the Gentile and pagan societies of the ancient world. For covenant was the foundation of these societies. It gave individual persons their sense of kinship, their sense of relationship, their sense of belonging—to a family, a tribe, and a nation. The covenant oath was the foundation of family, national, and religious life.

In today's legal usage, the words contract and covenant are almost interchangeable. But that was not true in the ancient world. Every covenant was based upon a contractual agreement,

but a covenant differed from a contract in many ways.<sup>1</sup> I'd like to mention just a few.

In contracts, the terms are negotiable; in covenants, they are not. God sets the terms of the covenant. The people may freely choose to accept or reject those terms, but rejecting the terms means the loss of any share in the covenant blessings.

Contracts are based upon the parties making promises; while covenants are only entered through the solemn swearing of an oath (*sacramentum* in Latin).

Contracts are normally based on profit; covenants are based on love. The former speaks to self-interest, while the latter calls us to self-sacrifice.

Contracts exchange goods and services; covenants exchange persons.

Contracts are legal devices; they are conditional, and they can be broken. A covenant is more of a social organism; it is unconditional and ongoing. Even when it is violated, it is not thereby dissolved.

Contracts are limited in scope; covenants affect many (if not all) areas of life.

Contracts are limited in duration; covenants last for life, even extending to future generations.

We could list many other differences between contracts and covenants, but these will suffice. For we can see in these differences that every covenant includes a contractual element, but also that the covenant far surpasses the mere contract and establishes a much different kind of relationship.

The differences show us that God's covenantal relationship with humankind is non-negotiable, but freely accepted; that it is

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<sup>1</sup> On the differences between covenants and contracts in Scripture, particularly with reference to marriage, see Scott Hahn, *Swear to God: The Promise and Power of the Sacraments* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); John Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 32–38; Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics* (Leiden: Brill 1995), 185–279; Paul F. Palmer, S.J., “Christian Marriage: Covenant or Contract?” *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), 617–665; G. M. Tucker, “Covenant Forms and Contracts Forms,” *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965), 487–503.

based on love; that it involves a sharing of our very lives—and His very life; that it is unlimited in scope. And that it is forever. In all of this, the divine covenant is very much like a marriage.

## The Prophet Motive

When God spoke through the prophets, He taught Israel always to hope and strive for the renewal of His covenant. And, again, He portrayed the covenant as a marriage. He spoke of Himself, or His Messiah, coming as a bridegroom to take His people as His bride (see Hos. 2:16–24; Jer. 2:2; Is. 54:4–8).

Human marriage, then, was for Israel an earthly image of God’s eternal love. Jon Levenson of Harvard, a contemporary Jewish scholar, explains that the Hebrew Scriptures are incomprehensible apart from this nuptial key:

What happened on the mountain in the ancient days was the consummation of a romance, a marriage in which YHWH was the groom and Israel . . . was the bride. Thus, a book like Deuteronomy, which is saturated with the idiom of the covenant, sees in the selection of Israel to be YHWH’s treasured possession, the fruit of a passionate affair (Deut. 7:6–8).<sup>2</sup>

Some people wrongly caricature Israelite religion as “legalistic,” simply because of its emphasis on the Law of the covenant. But Levenson makes clear: “It is not a question of law or love, but law conceived in love, love expressed in law. The two are a unity.”<sup>3</sup>

And the joy is not only for Israel. All creation is caught up in the celebration of this “wedding” of heaven and earth. Through the prophet Hosea, God promises: “I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast

<sup>2</sup> Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1985), 76.

<sup>3</sup> Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 77.

love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD” (2:18–20). Levenson concludes: “In the last stanza of Hosea’s prophecy (vs. 23–25), all creation joins in the wedding ceremony. Sky responds to earth, and earth responds by bringing forth her bounty. . . . The entire universe takes part in the sacred remarriage of YHWH and Israel.”<sup>4</sup>

Rabbi Michael Fishbane traces the influence of marital imagery from Hosea to Jeremiah (see Jer. 2:2, 3:1). But, above all, he writes: “The topic of covenantal love between God and Israel came to celebrated expression in the classical rabbinic interpretations of the Song of Songs.”<sup>5</sup> Which tradition, a Christian might add, is found in the continuation of the Church’s saints and scholars, from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa through Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas to Jacques Maritain and Pope John Paul II.

The prophets heralded a new and everlasting covenant, which would be a renewal of the original covenant between God and Adam, God and humankind, God and all creation. It would, in fact, be so all-encompassing as to be a “new creation.” The imagery of the prophets, which was employed in turn by Jesus Christ, was the imagery of betrothal and marriage. Thus, when Jesus came, He called Himself the “bridegroom” and those who were united to Him in baptism were called “espoused” (see Jn. 3:29; Mk. 2:19; Mt. 22:1–14, 25:1–13; 1 Cor. 6:15–17; 2 Cor. 11:2; see also CCC 796).

## Unveiled Intentions

Interestingly, it is Jesus who gave us the first explicitly marital interpretation of Genesis. The word “marriage,” after all, had not appeared in the story of Adam and Eve. Yet, we know the story is about marriage because Jesus said it was (see Mk. 10:2–16). Jesus said that the Genesis story reflects God’s will “from the beginning of creation” and that “what God has joined together, no human being must separate.”

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Fishbane, *JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarat* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 555–556.

Further along in the New Testament, Saint Paul provides a profound mystical commentary. In his Letter to the Ephesians, he quotes the Genesis text and explains that this marriage covenant in the Garden is a reference to the covenant between “Christ and the Church” (see Eph. 5:21–33). In using this unquestionable allusion to Adam and Eve becoming one flesh, Paul seems also to be shedding light on Adam’s task and failure. He helps us see that Adam did not “give himself up” for his bride as he should have, and he helps us see that Christ does indeed “give Himself up” for His bride, the Church. Where the first Adam had failed, with dire consequences, the new Adam succeeded, with saving power.

Note that Paul does not cancel out the literal meaning of the Genesis text, nor does he say it is not truly about husbands and wives. In fact, he gives a beautiful teaching on the love that husbands and wives share. But he is telling us that marriage is also a symbol of a far greater mystery—the love that Christ has for His bride, the Church, the love that God has for His people.

This mystery receives its most powerful expression in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Saint John, otherwise known as the Apocalypse—from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which literally means “unveiling.” Like the story of Adam and Eve, the Apocalypse evokes images that are both nuptial and priestly, for veils were then, as now, a standard part of a bride’s wardrobe. The bride’s “unveiling”—apokalypsis—was the culmination of the Jews’ traditional weeklong wedding feast. Indeed, apokalypsis became associated with the first moment of marital intimacy and bodily communion, the physical consummation of the nuptial covenant.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Karel van der Toorn, “The Significance of the Veil in the Ancient Near East,” in David Noel Freedman et al. (eds.), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law and Literature* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 327–338. After noting how “the principal ceremony in which the veil played a role is the wedding” (p. 330), van der Toorn observes: “While the importance of the bridal veil in the wedding ceremonial is generally acknowledged, it has not sufficiently been noted that the veil occurs in a dual capacity. Many studies dwell only on the veil as a symbol of chastity or virginity . . . [but] the bride came to the groom veiled . . . so that he might unveil her in privacy.” He cites Jacob’s attempt to marry Rachel (after *seven* years of work and a *seven-day* wedding): “The substitution of Leah for Rachel could only be successful

Like a bride, God's sanctuary was veiled, to be unveiled only with the consummation of the New Covenant (see Mk. 15:38). The holy of holies in Jerusalem's temple was a four-square sanctuary, overlaid with gold (1 Kg. 6:19–20), shielded from sight by a floor-to-ceiling veil, a curtain embroidered with animal and floral decorations. Thus, nature itself appeared as a "veil" of an even greater reality. Yet that veil was torn, literally and symbolically, when Christ's body was torn in His act of self-giving love on the Cross. Because of His self-offering, "we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the veil, that is, through his flesh" (Heb. 10:19–20).

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if it was a custom for the bride to be veiled when entering the premises where the wedding was celebrated" (p. 331; cf. Gen. 29:18–30). He adds: "The unveiling there...signals readiness to undress as a prelude to sexual intercourse" (p. 338). Also see R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 33–34: "she wore a veil (Ct 4:1, 3; 6:7), which she took off only in the bridal chamber." See A. Bertholet, *A History of Hebrew Civilization* (New York: Brentanos, 1926), p. 189, n. 189, who explains how the Hebrew word "to know" (*yada'*) came to denote sexual intercourse, since it was at the moment of marital consummation that the bridegroom actually saw his bride (now unveiled) for the first time; cf. David Mace, *Hebrew Marriage: A Sociological Study* (London: Epworth, 1953), 182. See the word-study of *apokalypsis* (and related terms) by Albrecht Oepke in G. Kittel (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* III (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 556–571. "Of the many meanings, the only one that has theological significance is that of 'head-covering' or 'veil'" (p. 558); yet he cites a number of cultic texts where a "veil" has sacred uses: "'Cover' e.g., for the tent of revelation, Ex. 27:16, also before the Holy of Holies, Ex. 40:5," and then notes: "In the OT it acquires a sacral sense not only as used anatomically in sacrificial regulations (Ex. 29:22 etc.) but also in the command that Moses should place the ark within the Holy of Holies and hide it from sight behind the curtain (Ex. 26:34)." In sum, not only Jewish brides, but Israel's holiest places and persons, were typically veiled. Oepke cites the case of Susanna (p. 562), "a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance . . . the wicked men commanded to unveil (*apokalypsthenai*) her face, for she was veiled" (LXX Dan. 13:31–32; cf. Lev. 18:6–19, where *apokalypseis* occurs seventeen times all within the context of Israel's sexual and cultic purity laws). On the meaning (and nuptial overtones) of *apokalypsis* in the Book of Revelation, see D. A. McLraith, *The Reciprocal Love Between Christ and the Church in the Apocalypse* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1989), 94–109; 123–147; 170–204. Also see G. W. Buchanan, *The Book of Revelation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 33: "The word translated 'revelation' can mean something uncovered, such as a revealed woman is one who has no clothing. . . . The term rendered 'naked' or 'unclothed' was also used to tell of a message Daniel received, informing him of the events that were to happen in the future" (cf. LXX Dan. 10:1). Also see M. Smith, "On the History of *Apokalypso* and *Apokalypsis*" in *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh II: New Testament and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 194–205.

That which is veiled is holy, to be unveiled only in covenant love. What the Apocalypse “unveils” is history’s final consummation, the marriage of Christ to His bride, the Church (see Rev. 19:9, 21:9, 22:17). She is “the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). Like the holy of holies, Christ’s bride is four-square and resplendent with pure gold (Rev. 21:16–18).

By “unveiling” the Church, our priestly Bridegroom reveals the gift of His love to His bride—the New Jerusalem—in the “glory and beauty” of the Spirit (see Ex. 28:2). And what else? The New Creation—“a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1).

It is a reprise of the opening chapters of Genesis. The third-century scholar Origen held that John’s Apocalypse was the interpretive key to John’s Gospel. Indeed, many puzzling aspects of the wedding feast at Cana seem to clear up when we understand that John is describing a new Genesis, a new creation, an eschatological “wedding feast” of the Lamb of God.<sup>7</sup>

In the first covenant, we saw the marriage union of a man and a woman, Adam and Eve (see Gen. 2:23–24). In the new covenant, we see a new man and a new woman present at a wedding feast. True, Mary is Jesus’ mother, not His bride. But in order to understand the supernatural depths of biblical symbolism that John intends here, we need to set aside our “natural” ways of reading. As the “woman,” Mary becomes the locus of a host of biblical symbols and expectations. She is simultaneously a daughter of Israel, the mother of the new people of God, and the bride of God.

Notice who is not mentioned in John’s account—the couple being married. Isn’t it odd that a wedding feast would be described, but not the bride and groom? Saint Augustine commented: “What marvel, if He went to that house to a marriage,

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<sup>7</sup> On the correlation of John and Revelation, see the remarkable study by Warren Austin Gage, “St John’s Vision of the Heavenly City” (PhD Dissertation, University of Dallas; Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2001).

Who came into this world of a marriage. For here He has His spouse whom He redeemed with His own blood, to whom He united Himself in the womb of the Virgin. For the Word is the Bridegroom, and human flesh the bride, and both together are one Son of God and Son of Man.”<sup>8</sup>

At Cana, Jesus appears as a new Adam, the firstborn of a new creation. What John implies is made clear elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul calls Jesus a “type” of Adam (see Rom. 5:14) and the new or last Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45–49). At Cana, Mary is the New Eve, the bride of the New Adam, the mother of the new creation.

At Cana comes the changing of water into wine—a transubstantiation that foreshadows Jesus’ New Covenant meal: the Eucharist, the bodily consummation of the covenant between God and His Church.<sup>9</sup> It is in the Eucharist that Jesus gives us His Body as food (Jn. 6:26–58), and we, God’s children, “share in flesh and blood” (Heb. 2:14). It is in the Eucharist that Jesus draws all humanity to the marriage supper of the Lamb. It is in the Eucharist that Christ can look upon the Church as Adam looked upon Eve and say, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23).

In the Eucharist, we are made members of the wedding, each of us seated at the head table of the “marriage feast” that Jesus called “my banquet” in His parables. In the Eucharist, we enter into the depths of the communion of love that God intends for each person. In baptism, each of us was “betrothed to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). Every Eucharist is our nuptial feast. “Every celebration,” Augustine said, “is a celebration of marriage—the Church’s nuptials are celebrated. The King’s Son

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<sup>8</sup> Saint Augustine, *Commentary on John*, Tractate viiii, c. 4, quoted in the *Catena Aurea* of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

<sup>9</sup> The Fathers did not miss the symbolism of Jesus performing His first miracle at a wedding, in a miracle that foreshadowed the Eucharist. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: “Christ has changed water into wine, which is akin to blood, at Cana of Galilee. Invited to the visible wedding, he accomplished this first miracle. . . . [Now] he has given to the children of the bridal chamber the joy of his body and blood.” Quoted in Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1956), 220.

is about to marry a wife and . . . the guests frequenting the marriage are themselves the Bride. . . . For all the Church is Christ's Bride."<sup>10</sup>

## What Is Veiled Is Holy

It is true of the temple, and it is true of the bride. The connection is eminently clear in Jesus' mother tongue. The Hebrew word for holiness is *kiddushin*, which is also the word used for the Jewish wedding ceremony and for the state of matrimony.<sup>11</sup>

When I first saw Kimberly on our wedding day, her beauty, even veiled, nearly knocked me off my feet. It was something mysterious, so much more than I could have expected. That wedding was a revelation to me. Little did I know that it was only a beginning, a genesis, a new creation, a new covenant.

Then came one of the seven angels . . . saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. (Rev. 21:9–11)

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the differences between a covenant and a contract?
2. What is "unveiled" in the Book of Revelation? What does this reality mean for the Church now and at the culmination of time?
3. How does Christ's miracle at the wedding at Cana foreshadow the Eucharist? How is the Eucharist a "marriage feast"?

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Claude Chavasse, *The Bride of Christ* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 147.

<sup>11</sup> See Rabbi Maurice Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 208: "*The veil is symbolic of her new unapproachability to others, not only sexually but as hekdesch, a sanctified object in the temple. The sacred objects of the tabernacle were 'veiled' before being taken up to be carried by the Levites. The betrothal ceremony is likened, in a legal sense, to those sanctified objects of the temple. This is the significance of the term kiddushin: the groom, in marriage, sets the bride aside as hekdesch.*"

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