

The Great Love Story of the Bible

I. The Story

1. God married Israel at Mount Sinai (Jer 2:2; Ezek 16:8–14).
 - a. They exchanged vows (Exod 19:8; 24:3; Ezek 16:8), and entered into a covenant with one another.
 - b. The result: union. As a married person can say, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song 6:3), so God can say to Israel, “you will be my people and I will be your God” (cf. Lev 26:12).
 - c. Thus God consummates the union by cohabiting with his bride via the tabernacle (Exod 40:34). Worship is the expression of this union (Lev 9).
2. God was a stellar spouse, but Israel was faithless and adulterous.
 - a. God lavished presents, affection, and love on Israel (Ezek 16:10–13). God was faithful to her and did not take another people to himself.
 - b. Israel committed adultery on multiple levels: worshiping other gods, making foreign alliances (Jer 2:18; Ezek 23:12), and literally intermarrying with foreigners who rejected God (1 Kgs 11:4). She even used her husband’s gifts as offerings for the gods (Ezek 16:15–22; Hos 2:8).
3. God is left with no choice except to divorce Israel.
 - a. God pleads with her to return, but she will not even acknowledge her sin (Jer 2:23, 35).
 - b. The betrayal is awful: “Can a virgin forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet my people have forgotten me days without number” (Jer 2:32).
 - c. God then brings her to public trial (Jer 2:1–3:5; Hos 2:10; Ezek 16:35–52), publicly renounces the marriage (“you are not my people, and I am not your God”; Hos 1:9), gives her a writ of divorce, and sends her away in shame into exile (Jer 3:8). (Note: this takes place in two phases: first Israel [northern kingdom], then Judah [southern kingdom]).
4. Is there a future for this relationship?
 - a. God’s law stipulates that a husband may not take a wife back when she has been married to another (Deut 24:1–4; Jer 3:1–5).
 - b. A harlot can never become a virgin. How can God and Israel’s relationship ever be restored in purity?
 - c. Nevertheless God insists that he will again take his people back as his bride (Isa 54:5–8; 62:4–5; Jer 3:12; Ezek 16:60–63; Hos 2:14, 19, 23). How can he do so?
5. Jesus Christ brings a new beginning through his death and resurrection.
 - a. Rom 7:1–4: the death of Christ is the death of *both* husband and bride!
 - b. His resurrection is the renewal of both as well: the bride is made a spotless virgin again (2 Cor 11:2).
6. Jesus and the church are now engaged to be married.
 - a. We have the Holy Spirit as our “engagement ring” (Eph 1:14).
 - b. Even now we enjoy a deep and rich union with our head (Eph 1:22–23), as Jesus beautifies us that we “might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27)
7. When Jesus returns, there will be the great wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9; 21:2). Then the marriage will be consummated with perfect union between Jesus and his people.

II. Implications

- Every major tenet of Christian sexual ethics can be derived from this narrative, since every human marriage is intended to picture this divine marriage.
- Singles have worth and dignity apart from sexual relations (1 Cor 7:8–9): Jesus did not need to be married in this life to have lived a full and complete human life. God did not need to marry Israel to be complete unto himself; he freely chose to do so.
- No sex before marriage: God does not come to dwell with his people (Exod 40:34) until he first makes vows to her, and she to him (Exod 19:8). Jesus' long wait for his marriage to his bride is a sign that sex is worth saving.
- Marriage is heterosexual (Gen 2:24; 1 Cor 6:9): God and Israel are different (God does not "marry" God; a nation does not "marry" a nation).
- Marriage is not an egalitarian arrangement (Eph 5:22): God has authority over Israel and responsibility to protect her, and Israel honors God by submitting to him.
- Monogamy (Tit 1:6): God does not marry multiple peoples.
- Adultery is a tremendous evil (Exod 20:14; Heb 13:4): Israel's spiritual adultery led to the loss of her relationship with God.
- Reasons for divorce: marriage is a union not to be torn asunder by anything except adultery (Matt 5:31–32; 19:26)
- Sex within the covenant bond of husband and wife is beautiful and glorious, picturing the greatest joy of all history: our union with God (Song 4–5; 1 Tim 4:3).
- Hope for the sexually and maritally broken: the grand love story is all about how God takes those who seem to be beyond repair and makes them new and whole.