# Marriage in the Old Testament. A Social Reality and a Theological Metaphor Reflected in the Biblical Rhetoric

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*Die Bibeltexte fokussieren sich auf die Entscheidung zur Ehe und auf die Bedingungen, unter denen sie gemacht werden sollte, aber sie geben uns nur wenige Informationen über das Ritual selber. Jeremiah (3, 6-8; 7, 9), Jesaja (1, 21; 23, 4, 7, 37; 54, 6), Ezekiel (16, 32.38; 23, 37) und insbesondere Hosea (Kapitel 1-3) sind diejenigen, deren prophetischen Stimmen gegen die Verletzung des Bundes zwischen Gott und die "Hure" Israel klangen, ein Bund den am Anfang wie eine Ehe gegründet wurde. Die Rhetorik mehrerer anderen hebräischen Texten bringt uns zum Verständnis der Ehe im Alten Testaments als Kauf-Verkauf Transaktion. Ausgehend von einer Keywords-Analyse schlägt diese Studie die Entdeckung der verschiedenen gesellschaftlicher Aspekte, der theologischen Werte, die metaphorisch ausgedrückt wird, und der spezifischen Themen, die durch die biblische Rhetorik über die Ehe im Alten Testament ausgedrückt werden.*

*Schlüsselwörter: Die Bibel*, *Verständnis der Ehe im Alten Testaments*, *Keywords-Analyse.*

## 1. Terminological delimitations of marriage in Old Testament

Marriage was founded in Paradise by God through the words contained in Gen. 1, 27-28; 2, 23-24 and confirmed by Christ the Saviour in Matthew 19, 5-6 and Marcus 10, 7-9. The union of man and woman for life was protected by clear laws in the Israelite society.

The most used verb that denominates the act of marriage is the Hebrew *laqah* "to take", which in nifal is translated by „to take into marriage". In specific situations, *laqah* is used as "to take into possession", "to choose", "to accept", which shows that in the patriarchal Israelite society, the man was the one who had the initiative in marriage, the woman being often its object. The Hebrew term *chatunnah*, referring to the marriage ritual, is met only in the Solomon's Song of Songs 3, 11. Another word, used equally seldom, is *onah* (probably deriving from the verb *anah*, "to answer", as well as "to certify"), which expresses the idea of cohabitation (Exodus 21, 10).

In the New Testament, the Greek noun *γάμος*, that seems to derive from the old verb *γαμ*, "to bind", "to unite", and the newer *γαμέω*, "to get married", "to take a wife", has a complex meaning, reaching the essence of things. This means wedding ceremony or, by extension, "wedding house" (Matthew 22, 10). In Hebrews 13, 4,



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*γάμος* is used for the institution of marriage which has to be "honoured by all". "The Lamb's wedding" in Rev. 19, 7 has a messianic meaning. It is the mysterious union between Christ and the Church, a time of blessing for those who have come to "the Lamb's wedding dinner" (Rev 19, 9).

**2. Principles of family life in the Old Testament**

In Antiquity, children were advised to marry while very young for reasons of a good functioning of a family. The young Egyptian, for instance, should marry early, have children, especially boys, and educate them: „Take a wife when you are young so that she makes you a son. You must raise him as long as you are young and must live until he will reach the age of manhood. Blessed is the man, who has many children, he is honoured for his sons." (Ani's Wisdom).

According to the Judaic law, the minimum age of those willing to get married was 13 for boys and 12 for girls, but the domestic reality brings to the foreground the marriage practice at 16-24, consequently after puberty. Nevertheless, the chronological factor was not the only one establishing the maturity of a boy or of a girl. The physical changes that take place inside the body and which differ from one person to another are viewed as having legal implications before and after the age of religious maturity. It was believed that a nine year old boy could marry, even if the signs of puberty might appear later (*Kiddushin*, 29b, 30a).

Marriages were often arranged by parents (Judg. 21, 21).

Prov. 31, 10-31, a text which is nowadays read at Hebrew weddings, presents the image of an ideal woman, candidate to being the king's future wife, who will give birth to the future heir of the throne: she is full of virtue who presents assurance to her husband because she makes only good during her whole life. Her chores are various: she works with wool and hemp (v. 13.19.22.24), cooks and feeds the ones in the household (v. 14.15), manages the house activities when the husband is not present (v. 15), she even takes care of small business (v. 16.24), works the land (v. 16), and speaks wisely (v. 26). All this bring her husband and sons' praise (v. 28), as well as the community leaders' appreciation (v. 23.31). To take such a woman into marriage meant, in the Judaic society, "to find the good" and getting a "favour (grace) from God" (Prov 18, 22). Fertility, industriousness, and morality were the basis criteria in choosing a wife and, implicitly, the most praised virtues of a woman in sapiential writings.

Cf. Exodus 21, 10, the man's duty was that of making sure that his wife would always have food, clothing, and security. The Babylonian treatise *Avot* (5, 21) presents the Israelite's obligations, among which: "marriage at 18, heirs at 20". So, the main and immediate responsibility of the family was that of giving birth to as many children as possible (Gen. 24, 60; 30, 1; Ruth 4, 11.14). God says: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (Gen. 2, 18), this does not mean that the purpose of marriage is giving the man a companion to cheer him up, to give him her love, support and care. The Scripture of the Old Testament insists on the fact that the woman was created by God for procreation.



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**3. The marriage ritual in Old Israel**

The biblical texts insist on the decision of marriage and the conditions in which it as to be made, but they give too little information on the ritual in itself. The mother could choose the wife for her son (Gen. 21, 21) or at least she was involved in this process (Gen. 27, 46; 28, 7; Judg. 14, 2-3). Song of Songs (3, 11) shows that the mother placed a wreath on her son's head in the wedding day. The groom as well as the bride had groups of followers (Judg. 14, 11), among which one is special (Judg. 14, 20; 15.2) and is called in John 3, 29 "the groom's friend".

It is not clear whether the wedding took place at the bride's house (Gen. 29, 22; Tobit 8, 19; Matt 25) or at the groom's house (Matt 22, 1-14; John 2, 9-10). The wedding ceremonies were long and full of fast (Judg. 14, 10-12, Jer. 7, 34; I Macc. 9, 39; Tobit 8, 19; John 2), but they seem to be exclusively laic as long as there is no mention of any religious authority participating in them with this status

Some moments of the wedding festivity are presented in the New Testament in parables, as that of the king's son's wedding (Matt 22, 2-14) or that of the ten virgins (Matt 25, 1-13). The story of the people who are waiting the master's return from the wedding (Luke 12, 36-38) and that of taking seats at the wedding feast (Luke 14, 8-10) bring forth other details about how such an event was organized in the Judaic society of the New Testament.

**4. *Mohar* – "the price" of the Israelite wife?**

The Israelite wedding was preceded by the engagement ritual, which consisted of choosing and "paying" for the wife. The use of the noun *mohar* in the Hebrew texts shows that taking a wife into marriage was viewed as the purchase of a property. Gesenius says that the translation of the noun *mohar* is "the price paid for a wife by her parents", bringing the texts from Gen. 34, 12; Exodus 22, 16; I Sam 18, 25 as arguments. Other uses of the term are different. In Arabic it means the groom's gift for his future wife and in Latin, dos, a gift given by the parents to their daughter who is to be married. *Mohar* derives from the verb *mahar*, "to buy", "especially a wife" (Gesenius), for whom the parents will offer *mohar* (Gen. 22, 15). Consequently, *mohar* seems to be the price paid by a man to the parents for his "acquisition", in other words, a "property" bought with money, which he van use as he pleases. This interpretation was authorized by W. Robertson Smith who states: "Marriage by buying can be identified in the whole Semitic space; each time when the husband is a Ba'al or master for is wife. The Arabic term *mahr* is the same with the Hebrew *mohar* (...), and their etymological meaning is simple: «price»".

However, etymology is not so simple and that is why many Bible scholars were not satisfied with translations like „Kaufpreis", „Brautgeld" sau „prix d'achat". All the arguments for such translations are inadequate and it is sure that *mohar* was only a price paid for the future child (Lev 25, 45-46) of the future spouses.



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Some Hebrew texts bring big question marks regarding the understanding of the Old Testament marriage as a selling-buying transaction. Deuteronomy 21, 10-14 states that no one could sell his wife, even if she was captured in the war because he would thus make her a slave and humiliate her. Also, a master "who chose a woman" was not allowed to re-sell her to another family if the woman "is not to his liking" (Exodus 21, 8).

Furthermore, there is no clear evidence of a marriage made like a transaction in the whole Old Testament. The texts that is most often invoked in supporting the thesis of marriage as transaction is Gen. 31, 14-15: "And Rachel and Leah answered and said unto him, Is there yet any portion or inheritance for us in our father's house? Are we not counted of him strangers? for he hath sold us, and hath quite devoured also our money.". Laban's daughters complain for having been sold, but this can be an exception and it cannot prove the existence of a custom. Quite the opposite, it is the very text that shows that Laban has broken the law by selling his daughters as if they were goods

Booz' taking Ruth as his wife, in Ruth 4, 10, is often quoted as proof of the fact that a wife was bought: "And I bought Ruth, the Moabite, Mahlon's wife, for me to have as a wife". But the verb used in this text is *qana*, "to get", "to create", but also "to buy", from which *qoneh* "buyer", "owner". The verb *qana* means generally "to acquire" and does not necessarily imply paying a price. Even though, when marriage or engagement are discussed in corroboration with sellable objects, biblical Hebrew uses terms that mean "to get", as it is the case in Ruth 4, 10.

Very important is the fact that the Hebrew term *mohar* appears only three times in the Old Testament: in Gen. 34, 12, for Dina; in Exodus 22, 16-17, in the case of a raped virgin; in I Sam. 18.25, David's bravery for Micol).

Also, the verb *mahar*, "to acquire by paying a price", "to give dowry", "to marry someone for someone else", is met only in Ps. 16, 4 (in Qal, Perfect) and in Exodus 22, 15.

It is obvious that the texts, limited in number, do not use usual terms, even more, they can be seen as exceptions from the rule. Consequently, the researchers are looking for the "emergency" solution, that of arguing the thesis of marriage as selling of materials similar to Arabia Mesopotamia, and Ugarit, which cannot have a decisional weight for the precise social meaning of the term wedding/engagement in the Old Testament.

Recent anthropological research on the ancient or primitive peoples reject the idea of a connection between payment with money or offering gifts and the mere buying of the bride in the seller-money-buyer system. It is rather a system of compensation that strengthens the relations between families and encourages or confirms the marriage. The text from Hosea 2, 21-22 confirms that this was the truth in the Israelite culture in this respect. In this text, marriage is used as an image of the covenant made (in v. 20) between Yahweh and Israel (as in Ezek. 16, 8 and Mal. 2, 14). Yahweh will make Israel His fiancé. But what is *mohar* in this context? Roger Daniels Dwight considers that *mohar* is a "compensation gift", an



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engagement gift that was usually offered by the bride's father to the groom as "dowry" and possibly also the other way around, by the groom to the bride's father (I Sam. 18, 25-27; II Sam. 3, 14). As soon as the "gift" is given to the groom, the woman becomes the groom's legal wife (Deut. 22, 23-24), even though the marital physical relation has not been consumed (Deut. 20, 7; 28.30). The marital relation could be consumed in a "bargain (Tobit 7, 13), maybe a marriage contract (*chetuva*), that was rather a promise, in front of God, of keeping the covenant between the two (Gen. 2, 18; Prov. 2, 17; Ezek. 16, 8; Mal. 2, 14).

**5. Property and authority in the husband-wife relationship**

In the Judaic antiquity, a man was called *baal*, "master", or "owner". This meaning of the term in the context of marriage has been contested by many Bible scholars. For example, Johannes Pedersen sustained that *baal* must be understood in the context of the interpersonal relation in a marriage; it does not denote a unilateral sovereignty (for which Hebrew used the term *adon*). Also, Neufeld makes a distinction between property and authority, showing that it is difficult to understand how the husband came to be called *baal*; how the idea of a servitude relation between woman and man came to be used.

Understood in a Isaiah key, the word *baal* stresses more on the man's capacity of procreation. This fits very well the above mentioned thesis, that what a husband owned was not his wife's person, but her sexuality. In marriage, a man did not have a property right over his wife, but exclusive rights over her sexuality and fertility, by extension, over the children resulted from the fruitfulness of their marriage. In this context, the use of *baal* meant, undoubtedly, the expression of the husband's authority, the idea of his property over his wife's sexuality and fertility. It follows that the concept of legitimate property is applied to a woman only before marriage, when she is the property of her father who is responsible for it. In other words, the only meaning in which the woman could be described as "property" would her status as a daughter, not as a wife.

The man's property was the children, received as wedding gift from God through his wife. Leah, Jacob's first wife, sees her six sons as a wedding gift given to her by God: "God hath endued me with a good dowry; now will my husband dwell with me, because I have born him six sons" (Gen. 30, 20). Other biblical paragraphs indicate that the parents who give birth to children receive them as a "fruit", as a gift from God (Gen. 30, 22; I Sam. 1, 11.19). To be fertile as a fruitful land, to have many children means being blessed by God. That is why the Psalmist says "the sons are God's legacy" (Ps. 126, 3).

Having numerous heirs is very often associated with owning properties and receives Yahweh's blessing. Children are a crowning and a meaning of life because they bestow security and strength to the whole family (Prov. 17, 6; Ps. 127, 3-5; 128, 3; Job. 5, 25; Sir. 25, 10).

The Judaic family has been viewed as a social unity – man, woman, children and other generations – in which the law of complementarity functions. Within the



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family, the man and the woman are "one flesh" (Gen. 2, 24), and the superiority-inferiority relations are only formal.

The mere statement that a wife was legally her man's property is unjustified and definitely wrong. The social and juridical status of the woman in the Old Testament is far from being characterized by such primary sentences. As the didactic and poetical writings of the Hebrew culture show, the social situation of the woman in family and society cannot be captured in fixed formulas as it is indefinable. It was not constant; it varied according to the socio-cultural and historical-economical circumstances of society. In particular, the woman's status was determined by the husband's character and the role that he played within the community. Establishing a family has never depended only on the husband's status, but on the familial cohesion of both spouses, by their moral and religious integrity, on their ability of getting along in society, on the fulfilment of their dignity as sons of God, on the way they manifested among peoples as "chosen priesthood and kingly people".

In this ancient Judaic mentality, the idea of property can be applied only to God Yahweh, The Maker of all, the Gift Giver, and the Providence of history and the people within it. The whole creation is His property and man, His highest creation, is not amorphous; it was made in His Liking, it is not irrational, it was created after the Divine reason, it is not inert, it was its own free will towards the sainthood of God the Saint, the "Father in heaven".

**6. Polygamy in Israel. Forbidden marriages**

Although Gen. 4, 19 refers to Lameh's two women, the practice of polygamy, the first breaking of the unity in two in marriage, was not at all generalized. Sexual relation outside marriage often had a "utilitarian" function, that of procreation (see the examples of Abraham's accepting Agar the servant, Jacob's marriages out of which his twelve sons, lords of the people, resulted). Of course, there are also relations with many women especially on the case of persons with authority (David, in I Sam. 18, 27; Solomon, in I Kings 11, 1-3).

Because Moses tried to put the polygamous relations to index unsuccessfully, the Law imposed categorical delimitations regarding a man's marriage to two sisters (Lev. 18, 18), the king's marriage with more women (Deut. 17, 17), increased rights for the servant who marries the master's son (Exodus 21, 8). Monogamous marriage is an ideal (Mal. 2, 14-16), a reflection of the relation existing between God and His chosen people (Hosea 2, 19).

In the Old Israel, maybe for keeping the property inside the family, cousins could marry among them (Isaac and Rebecca, in Gen. 24, 15; Jacob with Lea and Rachel, in Gen. 28.2; Esau and Basmati, in Gen. 36.3). However, the 18th chapter of Leviticus imposes categorical interdictions for sexual relations between relatives. A man could not marry blood relatives, widows that were blood relatives, a woman who did not divorce her husband effectively, with the daughter or niece of a former wife, with the former wife's sister during the former's life.



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The children resulted from incest or from a forbidden marriage are called *mamzerim* and are under many restrictions. Those born of a married father and an unmarried mother are not mamzerim, whereas the babies born of a married woman's relation with a man, who is not her husband, are *mamzerim*.

The priest could not marry a divorced or promiscuous woman, or one that was the fruit of an illegitimate marriage, nor a widow with children.

**7. The levirate marriage**

The law of the levirate marriage is stipulated in Deut. 25, 5-10. It said that a brother of a widow's husband who did not have children had to marry the widow and the sons resulted from the levirate marriage were considered sons of the dead one (Gen. 38). Ruth 4, 7 describes the juridical procedure of renouncing the levirate for someone else. Another case of levirate is presented in Matt. 22, 23-30.

**8. Israel – Yahweh's virgin bride**

Jeremiah (3, 6-8; 7, 9), Isaiah (1.21; 23.4.7.37; 546), Ezekiel (16, 32.38; 23, 37) and especially Hosea (chap. 1-3) are those whose prophetic voices raise against breaking the covenant, established like a marriage, between God and Israel the "debauched". Prophet Hosea, cheated on by the wife who committed adultery, makes a theological example for Israel out of this experience because by accepting the worshiping of the gods of foreign people, Israel gets out of the covenant relation with God (Hos. 2, 18; 3, 1-5). In Hosea, the punishment of the unfaithful wife becomes a clear symbol of the punishment form the apostate people. (Hos. 2, 4-15). In fact, the book of Hosea is a parable of the permanent divine love of God for a sinful people.

The idea of Yahweh's providence over Israel "the virgin" can be found in many texts of the Old testament Scripture, but Jer. 31, 3-4 is special because it speaks about a new custom, a new covenant between the "partners": "The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel»". It is not by hazard that Jeremiah introduces the idea of distance in this text. The virgin of Israel, by disobedience and by breaking the covenant, "has fallen and will not rise again, she is on the ground and there is nobody to get her up!" (Am. 5, 2), she became estranged from God. Isn't the cry "My Father, you were the Friend of my youth!" Israel's "coming to senses"? Then God shows Himself "from the distances", confessing His eternal love and promising the reestablishment of the natural state to the "virgin of Israel". But it is not the state before her sins; it is a renewed state.

**9. The Church, the New Israel – Christ's virgin bride**

Tertullian († 230) is one of the first Church writers who spoke about the mystical marriage between virgins and Christ, who highlighted the eschatological value of virginity, its ecclesiological dimension. Methodius from Olympus († 311)



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develops these ideas and sees virginity as an expression of the Church sainthood. The woman who appears in the sky clothed in the sun (Rev. 12, 1-6) is "our Mother", the one that the prophets called "Jerusalem", "Mount Zion", "tent and Temple of God" and "Bride", Methodius says, adding: "This is the Church; her sons, born through baptism, will run towards her from all the corners of the world, after resurrection. Receiving the eternal light, clothed in the brightness of the Word, she is full of great joy. Because what greater adornment if not the light could the empress wear in order to present to God as a Bride?"

Commenting on Ps. 44, 11-12: "The empress sat on Your right, dressed in golden clothed and beautifully adorned. Listen daughter and see and lend your ear and forget thy people and thy father's house", Saint John Chrysostom, in Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, sees in this text the act of God's sending His servants "to engage His Son with the Church among peoples" and the prophet David as the one sanctifying this engagement.

Paul himself compares the Church in Corinth with a virgin who comes forth to Christ the Groom (II Cor. 11, 2): "For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.". Paying attention to the theological content of the Pauline philology, Saint John Chrysostom states in his commentary to this text: „«For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy». He does not say: «I love you», but says exactly what is much more passionate: «I am jealous over you» (as in Jer 13.3: «I loved you with eternal love», *m.n.*). Thus are the passionate souls of those in love (…). Then he shows the cause that made him feel this: «for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin ». So it is not to me, but to Whom I want, to Whom I engaged you. That the present time is engagement time, and the time when they will say: «the Groom has arrived» is different. O, what new and wonderful things! In the world, the virgins keep their state until marriage and after that they are not virgins any more. But here it is not like this; even if they have not been virgin before this marriage, they become virgin after the wedding Thus the entire Church is virgin."

The state of virginity of the Church is a great gift of Christ the Groom for us, a calling towards its keeping and a responsibility of interiorizing *Ecclesiae Magna* in our life, in *ecclesia domestica*.

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