Appendix 13. The Bride of Christ

There is a lot of confusion in Christendom concerning the "Bride of Christ." Some people say it is Israel, others say it is the Christian Church, others say it is both, and so forth. The two primary reasons for the confusion on the subject of the bride are failure to carefully read what the Bible actually says, and failure to identify and understand important figures of speech God uses in the Bible. We will start our study on the bride by studying the figures of speech of comparison, because we will never be able to understand why Israel is called a "virgin," a "daughter," "bride," or "wife" unless we understand those figures of speech.

In the Bible, three common and important figures of speech of comparison are simile, metaphor, and hypocatastasis. A simile (pronounced sĭm-ĭ-lee) is a comparison by "resemblance," usually using words such as "like" or "as." If a person is noisy and sloppy when he eats, a person might look at him and say, "You eat **like** a pig." The sloppy eater is said to "resemble" a pig, and that kind of comparison is a "simile." Psalm 1:3 uses a simile when it says a righteous person is **like** a tree planted by the water.

A metaphor is a comparison by "representation." In a metaphor, one noun represents another, usually by using the verbs "is" or "are." If the pig example above is made into a metaphor, instead of saying, "You eat like a pig," the person would compare the man to a pig by representing him as one and saying "You **are** a pig." Jesus used a metaphor when he said to his disciples, "I **am** the vine; you **are** the branches…" (John 15:5 NIV).

A hypocatastasis (pronounced: hī-poe-cä-täs'-tä-sis) is a comparison by "implication." The comparison is not directly stated, but it is implied. If we turn the pig example into a hypocatastasis, someone in the dinner party would simply look at the sloppy man and say, "Pig!" Just saying "Pig," effectively communicates the implied comparison between the man and a pig. The flexibility in language and figures allows for hypocatastasis to import meaning in more ways than just factually stating the implied image. For example, at a dinner party of family members who were used to poking fun at one another, instead of saying "Pig," one person might just look at the other and say, "Oink, oink." Doing that would effectively communicate the implied meaning of "pig." A linguist might point out that what seems to be going on in that example is that the sound the pig makes is put for metonymy for the pig itself, which is then being imported by hypocatastasis. However, linguistic expressions are often unique and fluid enough they cannot be easily put into tightly defined boxes, and hypocatastasis seems to handle the "oink, oink," example well on its own.

The figures metaphor and hypocatastasis can be confusing because the figure can be missed and people think that the figure of speech is literal. An example of this happening with metaphor is when Christ took the bread at the Last Supper and said, "This is my body."

He meant, "This bread represents my body." An example of hypocatastasis being missed is Genesis 3:1, when the Devil is called the "serpent" by hypocatastasis. The comparison should be clear because literal snakes cannot talk, the Devil is referred to as the serpent in other verses of Scripture (Rev. 20:2 is very clear!), and when 2 Corinthians 11:3 (KJV) says that "the serpent" beguiled Eve, the context is Satan and his ministers (v. 14). Nevertheless many people miss the hypocatastasis and think that the "serpent" in Genesis was some kind of actual snake, and artists do not help much when they paint pictures of a snake with Eve in the Garden of Eden. The artists would have been more helpful to our understanding of the Bible if they had painted Eve with the Devil, appearing as a shining spiritual being.

As well as the figures of speech of comparison mentioned above, we also need to understand the figure of speech "personification." "Personification" occurs when something that is not a person is described as a person. We humans relate so well to other humans that referring to something as a person often makes it easy to understand. There are many examples of personification in the Bible. Wisdom is portrayed as a woman calling out for people to listen to her (Prov. 8:1). Ethiopia is portrayed as a woman stretching out her hands to God (Ps. 68:31; KJV; ESV; NASB. Ethiopia is "Cush" in some versions), and, of course, the nation of Israel is portrayed as a woman many times, which is the subject of this study.

The figures of comparison and personification do a good job of communicating information and emotion. For example, saying the people of Israel broke their covenant with God gives us information but does not communicate much emotion. In contrast, referring to Israel as a woman and saying she committed adultery with her pagan lovers brings up a host of emotions. In the Bible, Israel is personified as a woman, and then that personification is intertwined with the figures of comparison we have been studying, when "she" is called a virgin, daughter, wife, etc.

Although Bible teachers know Israel is not a woman, they are confused about the words "bride" or "wife" and invest more literal meaning into those terms than they are meant to communicate. Furthermore, because they do not understand that "bride" is simply a comparison, they try to figure out who is the bride and when the marriage occurs. We do not get confused when Israel or Judah is called a lioness (Ezek. 19:2), a horse (Jer. 5:8), a vine (Jer. 2:21), a camel (Jer. 2:23), or a wild donkey (Jer. 2:24). In a similar way, we should not get confused when God calls His people a "daughter," "virgin," "bride," or "wife." There are so many spoken and unspoken emotions, expectations, and commitments between a man and a woman that it is more succinct and powerful for God to occasionally refer to His people as a "daughter," "virgin," or "wife" than to try to describe the relationship in paragraph form.

The female figurative terms that God uses to describe His people include "daughter" (Micah 4:8), "virgin daughter" (Jer. 14:17), "virgin" (Jer. 18:13; 31:4, 21; Amos 5:2), "sister" (Ezek. 16:45, 52; 23:11), "espoused" or "bride" (Jer. 2:2), "wife" (Ezek. 16:8, 32; 23:4, Isa. 54:6; cp. Jer. 3:1-14; Hosea 2:7), and "mother" (Ezek. 16:20, 36; 23:4; Hos. 2:2).

These terms do not just refer to the women of Israel, but to both men and women collectively. It is misunderstanding the figures of comparison for a man to think that when God's people are called a "virgin daughter," the meaning God is importing into the text does not apply to him because he is a man. Similarly, women should realize they are included when God's people are called "sons." When God calls His people a "vine," we know the term applies to both men and women, and similarly when God uses hypocatastasis and refers to Israel as a "bride," the term includes both men and women. Reading Jeremiah 2:2 in different versions shows that some versions use the word "bride" and some do not. The problem is in part caused by the original languages, because the word for a newly married woman in Hebrew and Greek also had other meanings. The Hebrew word *kallah* (Strong's #3618, כַּלָּה) meant a daughter-in-law, a bride, or a wife (recently married or married long before). The Greek word *numphē* (Strong's #3565, νύμφη) referred to an engaged woman, a recently married woman, a young wife, and a daughter-in-law. Thus, whether or not the verse in question should be translated "bride," "wife," or "daughter-in-law" had to be determined by context.

There are many ways we can tell that the female terms God uses to describe His people are figures of speech. One of them is by comparing the terms themselves. It is not possible for Israel to literally be a virgin daughter and also God's wife at the same time. Furthermore, in the Old Testament God married Israel and Judah, and although He divorced Israel, He is going to be married to her again in the future under the New Covenant (Hos. 2:16-25). But in the Four Gospels and the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ is the bridegroom (Matt. 9:15; John 3:29; Rev. 21:9). This should catch our attention, because in the Law of Moses a person could not have sexual relations with his father's wife, so legally Jesus cannot marry his Father's wife and be the "bridegroom" (Lev. 18:8, 15; 20:11, 12). These "marriages" are figurative, and describe in a figurative way the intimate relationship that both God and Christ will have with the people. Also, Israel and Judah are called "sisters," but God marries them both and even has children by them both (Ezek. 23:4). Yet the Law of Moses forbids a man from marrying two sisters (Lev. 18:18). Furthermore, the Law says a person could not marry his daughter or granddaughter (Lev. 18:6, 10). However, Israel is called God's virgin daughter and yet He married her, which again would be breaking His own law.

Still more evidence that the female terms that God uses to describe Israel are figurative comes from the fact that there is no orderly chronological progression in the use of these terms in the Old Testament. If they were meant literally in some way, Israel would start as a daughter, a virgin, and then become espoused (engaged), then get married, then be a mother. Instead, there is no flowing chronology to the use of the terms. Note the following chronology as Israel goes from being a wife to a virgin to a daughter back to a wife, and note how especially confusing things would be in books such as Jeremiah if the terms were literal.

- **1450 BC**. Israel becomes God's wife after she leaves Egypt. (Ezekiel 16:8 portrays the covenant made between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai as a marriage covenant).
- **Late 700's BC**. Israel is a virgin (Amos 5:2).
- **About 700 BC**. "Jerusalem" (also called "Zion") is a daughter (Micah 4:8).
- **About 700 BC**. The prophet Hosea shows Israel as acknowledging having once been God's wife (Hos. 2:7). There is a future time coming when Israel will again be a faithful wife—this is prophesied for the future (Hos. 2:16). Hosea also portrays Israel as a mother (Hos. 2:2).
- **About 700 BC**. Israel is a wife (Isa. 54:6).
- **About 600 BC**. Jeremiah shows God's people as engaged or "espoused" to Him (Jer. 2:2); a wife (Jer. 3:14), a "virgin daughter" (Jer. 14:17), and a "virgin" (Jer. 18:13; 31:4; 21).
- **About 595-570 BC**. Ezekiel portrays Israel through her history from Sinai as an adulterous wife (Ezek. 16:32; 23:4).

More evidence that the female terms used of Israel are figurative comes from the fact that Israel is sometimes not called a woman at all, but a man. Israel is called God's "son" (Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1; 13:13). Hosea 7:9 refers to Israel as a man with gray hair, and 12:7 and 8 refers to Israel as a merchant man who has become rich by dishonesty. In Malachi 2:11 Judah is portrayed as a husband who has married the daughter of a foreign god. Isaiah 61:10 uses the figure simile to compare Israel to both a bride and bridegroom in the same verse! Obviously, Israel is not both a man and a woman, or a bride and bridegroom, in any literal way.

The key to recognizing the seemingly confusing references to Israel as a man or woman is realizing that each reference is a figure of speech and each reference stands on its own. In each case God is using a specific illustration to make a point, just as He does when He calls His people a "vine," "wild donkey," "sheep," or "camel." When God compares Israel to an animal or plant, we do not try to build a chronology, as if Israel could evolve from one thing to another. Similarly, we should not try to build a chronology when God calls Israel a virgin or wife. Each term imports into the text a picture and a meaning that is important to the point that God is trying to make in that specific context, and each term stands on its own.

When God calls Israel a "virgin," or "daughter" He is placing the emphasis on attitudes and behaviors that were important to young women in that culture, such as purity, chastity, modesty, and obedience. When He calls Israel a "wife," He is emphasizing things such as fidelity, commitment, love, and respect. When God calls Israel a "son," He is emphasizing the intimacy of the relationship, family love and pride, and obligations and

privileges of the family. When God portrays Israel as a man with gray hair, He is pointing out that through bad decisions Israel has become old and weak. When God portrays His people as a husband who has married a foreign woman, He is lamenting the covenants that His people have made with idols.

When God calls Himself a husband, He is emphasizing His love for Israel, His commitment to her, His expectations, and His disappointments at her behavior. When the Bible refers to Jesus as the "bridegroom," it is highlighting the intimate relationship between Jesus and his people, their obligations to each other, and what they can expect from each other. The Bible says that both God and Christ marry Israel, not as a contradiction, but because both God and Christ have a relationship with Israel and want and deserve the love and devotion from the people that a husband should have from his wife.

The most dominant comparison in the Old Testament that is used of God's people is the figurative portrayal of Israel as God's wife. This figurative imagery is very deeply embedded in the text and it is expressed in many different ways: sometimes by calling God a "husband" and Israel a "wife," sometimes referring to the "marriage," sometimes calling Israel a "whore" for her unfaithfulness and referring to it as "adultery," sometimes noting that the couple got a divorce, and so forth. In fact, there are so many verses that in some way make reference to the marriage that it would be difficult to catalogue them all.

God's "marriage" to Israel occurred on Mount Sinai after God gave some of the Law to Israel and the people made a covenant to obey Him. Ezekiel describes this in figurative terms.

> **Ezekiel 16:8**
> "'Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

The context of Ezekiel 16:8 is important to the subject. Verse three refers to the pagan ancestry of Israel, which is accurate because Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldeans in Mesopotamia. Verses four and five say that when Israel was born she was despised. Exactly when God considered Israel to be "born" is not stated, likely because her "birth" is not literal but is part of the personification of Israel as a woman. Interestingly, although God refers to Israel as His daughter in other places, He does not do so here because He certainly did not despise her on the day of her birth. We know from history and the Bible that as Abraham's descendants multiplied, they were in fact despised while they were in Haran, Canaan, and Egypt. Nevertheless, God pitied Israel and made her to grow and flourish (verses 6 and 7).

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He made a blood covenant with her (Exod. 24:3-8). Bulls were sacrificed, and half their blood was sprinkled on the altar (representing God), and half on the people. We commonly refer to that blood covenant as "the Old Covenant" (or "Old Testament"), but God figuratively refers to it in Ezekiel 16:8 as His marriage covenant with Israel. After that covenant, when the Israelites sinned against God, He often referred to their behavior as "adultery." When God uses words like "adultery" (Jer. 3:6, 8, 9; Ezek. 16:32; 23:37; Hosea 1:2; 4:15), or accuses Israel of "whoredom" or calls her a "whore" or "harlot" (KJV: Isa. 1:21; Jer. 2:20; 3:9; 13:27; Ezek. 16:15, 33; 20:30; Hos. 2:2-5; 5:3), He is clearly indicating that He had married her and she was His wife. When versions such as the NIV say "prostitution," usually the Hebrew word can refer to prostitution or adultery. Since God was married to Israel, "adultery," is usually a better description than "prostitution."

God tolerated Israel's spiritual adultery only so long, and then He "divorced" her, abandoning her to her enemies (Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:8). Nevertheless, God promised to remarry Israel in the last days and never be separated from her again (Hos. 2:16-23; esp. 19, 20). For her part, Israel will repent of her wickedness and return to God, her husband, saying, "I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now" (Hos. 2:7). God will be glad, saying, "In that day...you will call me 'my husband'" (Hos. 2:16). This "marriage" is still future, and represents the time, after the Second Coming of Christ, when God's people will be faithful to Him. Just as the first "marriage" was a covenant (the Old Covenant), this new marriage will be associated with the New Covenant, and it will last forever (Jer. 31:31-33).

The figurative use of the bride not only fits Israel, it fits the Christian Church. This makes sense because what God and Christ want from people does not change over time and is typified well by a wife: love, devotion, and fidelity. Thus, the Church is clearly compared to a bride or wife twice in Scripture. One of them is in 2 Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 11:2 (NASB)

For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you *as* a pure virgin.

In this verse the husband is Christ and the engaged virgin is the Church. The point of the verse is that the Church is to be a "pure virgin" for "one husband," who is Christ. In the Old Testament, Israel was to give herself only to God, and when the people worshipped other gods it angered Him and He called her actions "adultery." In the New Testament the figure of the virgin bride is again used to effectively communicate how Christians are to be devoted to Christ and not be led astray to another lord or another Gospel.

The personification of the Church as a wife helps us relate to what Jesus did for "her" and what we are to do for him, as well as instructing Christian husbands and wives on how to relate to each other in a godly way.

Ephesians 5:25-27
25) Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her
26) to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,
27) and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

The figure personification helps us understand how Christ gave himself for the Church, and effectively communicates the actions, commitments, and expectations of Christ with minimum words but maximum impact.

In Revelation 21:9-11, the bride of Christ is specifically identified as the New Jerusalem. The verse refers to the New Jerusalem as both the "bride" and "wife" of Christ. Of course, the wife of Christ is not the city, but the city figuratively represents all the people who live there. Thus, in the book of Revelation we see that the wife of Christ is neither Israel nor the Christian Church, but rather is every saved person who has ever lived, all of whom will live eternally in the New Jerusalem.

Portraying all the saved people as the wife of Christ shows us the love and devotion that will exist into eternity between Christ and the people he died for. Also, we must recall that the Old Testament prophecies foretold that God would also be married to these saved people, and as God's wife they would also give Him the love and devotion that He deserves forever and ever.

Comparisons such as "son," "virgin," "bride," and "wife" import a host of meaning into the text. We are rightly thinking about the comparison when we focus on the meaning it is importing into the text and ask ourselves why God is using the illustration and what lesson He wants us to learn from it. God wants and deserves love and devotion from His people, and the human terms God uses to describe us illustrate that well. As God's sons, let us take our family pride and our responsibility to love, provide for, and protect our own fellow family members seriously. As husbands, let us keep our covenants pure and not develop relationships with God's rivals and enemies. As virgins, let us diligently keep ourselves pure and unspotted from things that ruin our, or our Father's, reputation. As daughters let us be diligent in our work to better ourselves and our family. As brides and wives, let us be loving and devoted to God and Christ, and show them true fidelity, making sure they are the most important things in our lives. These concluding illustrations of sons, husbands, virgins, daughters, and brides/wives, should be understood in terms of the biblical

culture. Gender role models are often significantly different today, but it is important for us to understand the meaning of figures as God intended them to be understood.

Let us not be “goats,” ignoring the things of God, or “wolves” tearing his flock, but be “sheep” willingly following the Shepherd, and “lions” fighting for God’s kingdom.