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“ONE FLESH“

IN THE OLD AND

NEW TESTAMENTS

Wayne J.H. Stuhlmiller

Although much has been written on sexuality and marriage from the perspective of the Old and New Testaments, little attention has been given to what is perhaps the most engaging and elusive expression relating to the whole topic, namely, the “one flesh” expression which occurs in the poetic climax of the Genesis 2 account of creation and recurs as a technical expression in the New Testament writing. The purpose of this paper is to explore the use of this expression in the Old and New Testaments in the interests of understanding more fully its content.

GENESIS 2:24

A discussion of the “one flesh” expression must begin with the study of its occurrence in the Genesis 2 account of the creation of Woman. The use of the expression in the New Testament documents reflects the understanding of this ancient poetic fragment in the first century Jewish and Christian communities.

“Then the man said,

‘This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh,

She shall be called Woman

because she was taken out of Man.’

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.”(RSV)

An examination of the expression “one flesh” in v. 24 must take into account the occurrence of “flesh” in connection with “bone” in the previous verse. Traditionally,

vv. 23f. have been interpreted in terms of vv. 21f. as an aetiological statement concerning the mysterious and powerful sexual impulse within man, the love which "is strong as death" (Song of Solomon 8:6). According to this interpretation, Woman was created from the very "flesh" of man.¹ Consequently, neither Man nor Woman is whole or complete apart from the reunification of their "flesh" in the sexual relationship of marriage. Sexual drive is the yearning of the incomplete individual for the wholeness which can only be attained through sexual reunion.²

Recently, however, this understanding of Gen. 2:23a as referring to Woman's derivation from the body of Man has been challenged on the basis of the use of "flesh" in conjunction with "bone" elsewhere in the Old Testament.³ Examination of the covenant formulae of II Samuel and I Chronicles has resulted in the suggestion that Gen. 2:23a is to be interpreted as a covenant formula.⁴ The associated meanings of "flesh" and "bone", viz., "weakness" and "strength", have been drawn upon to understand the character of this covenant relationship as one in which the oath of the covenant pledges abiding loyalty which will remain unaffected by changing circumstances which might vary from the extremes of strength to the extremes of weakness. V. 23a is interpreted, then, in terms of a covenant and the covenant oath and does not refer to the derivation of Woman from the "flesh" of Man. This interpretation suggests that the "one flesh" expression of v. 24 does not refer to the sexual relationship whereby the wholeness of Man, interrupted by the creation of Woman, is restored, but refers to a relationship or community bound by covenant oath.⁵

These suggestions may, indeed, throw new light on the original meaning of the tradition embodied in Gen. 2:23a. However, there can be little doubt that the Genesis 2 account intends v. 23 to be aetiological. Vv. 21-23 account for the powerful drive within man which urges him to sever the most intimate of family ties and "cleave"⁶ to his wife so that they become "one flesh." The context, therefore demands that v. 24 be understood in terms of the sexual drive and relationship which reunites the "flesh" of man.⁷

Within rabbinic Judaism the androgynous character of Man in the creation was

1. *hasela* in v. 22 may be translated as "rib" or "side."

2. Cf. Von Rad, Gerhard, *Genesis: A Commentary*, translated by John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 82f.; Zimmerli, Walther, *1 Mose 1-11; Die Urgeschichte* (Zurich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1943), pp. 177-183.

3. In this connection it should be noted that *basar* (or *sarks* in the LXX) is used as follows in the Old Testament: (1) To designate simply flesh, i.e., the soft tissues of the body; (2) With the adjective *kal* to designate "all living things" (cf. Gen. 6:12); (3) With the possessive pronoun to designate blood relations (cf. Gen. 37:27); (4) To designate a person (cf. Judith 10:13); (5) To designate one's self (cf. Sir. 25:26); (6) In reference to circumcision and the establishment of the covenant; and in conjunction with *'esem* it is used (7) to designate the human body (cf. Job 2:5); and (8) In reference to covenant relationships (II Sam. 5:1; 19:12; I Chr. 11:1).

4. Werner Reiser, "Die Verwandtschaftsformel in Gn 2, 23," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 16:1 (January-February 1960), pp. 1-4. Walter Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gn 2:23a)," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXXII:4 (October 1970), pp. 532-542.

5. Cf. Brueggemann's comment that "'One flesh' refers to solidarity of purpose..." p. 540.

6. *dabog* It should be noted that neither *dabog* nor *kollao* (or *proskollao*) are sexual in their root meanings, but have to acquire this connotation through usage. Cf. the discussion of Matthew 19:4-6 and Mark 10:6-9 below.

7. In this connection it is important to note that *basar* occurs in conjunction with *'esem* not only in covenant formulae but also to designate the human body in Job 2:5.

widely accepted and the account of the creation of Woman in Genesis 2 was understood as an aetiological narrative accounting for sexual drive and the institution of marriage.⁸ Typical of rabbinic teachings is the idea that men and women alone had in themselves only partial existence⁹ and that only in sexual union can a person find the fulness of the divine image in which Man was created.¹⁰ It was often stated that a man's wife was the source of his wholeness, peace, and blessings.¹¹

In reference to the "one flesh" expression, Josephus states that in sexual intercourse the souls of each are shared with each other and that this mingling of souls brings them into a common oneness.¹² Philo referred to the "one flesh" of marriage as a unity in which both partners share all experiences and even think alike. Rabbi Eleasar, referring to Gen. 2:23, comments that the "one flesh" expression refers to more than sexual intercourse; it depicts a phenomenon that remains even after divorce.

It is clear, then, that the terminology, context, and traditional interpretation of these verses point beyond covenantal ideas (though these may have been present in the traditions embodied in this passage) to aetiological ideas concerning the origin and function of sexual drive.

MATTHEW 19:4-6 AND MARK 10:6-9

The synoptists Matthew and Mark show Jesus quoting Gen. 2:24 LXX (in conjunction with Gen. 1:27) in the context of a discussion of divorce.

Matthew

He who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said,

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined¹³ to his wife, and two shall become one flesh"?

So they are no longer two but

Mark

From the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined¹³ to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

So they are no longer two but

8. Cf. Richard Batey, "The MIA sarks union of Christ and the Church," *New Testament Studies* 13:3 (April 1967), pp. 270-281; Paul Winter, "Sadoquite Fragments IV 20, 21 and the Exegesis of Genesis 1:27 in late Judaism," *Zeitschrift fuer die neutestimentliche Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London: SPCK, 1965), p. 54.

9. Cf. the statement by Rabbi Hiyya ben Gomdi: "(He who has no wife) is incomplete," quoted by Winter, "Sadoquite Fragments," p. 83.

10. Cf. the statement by Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedah: "Any man who has no wife is not (yet) a human being," quoted by Winter, "Sadoquite Fragments," p. 83.

11. Batey, p. 272.

12. *Contra Apionem* 2:25.

13. *kollethesetai* in Matthew and *proskollethesetai* in Mark.

one flesh. What therefore
God has joined together, let
no man put asunder.

one flesh. What therefore God
has joined together, let not
man put asunder.

These passages provide several insights into the understanding of Gen. 2:24. First, marriage is clearly rooted in man's sexual nature.¹⁴ It is interesting that human sexuality alone ("male and female") is cited without referring to the aetiological argument of Gen. 2:23 as the reason for the union of man and woman which results in their becoming "one flesh." Second, the "no longer" statement suggests that the "one flesh" formed by this sexual union is understood not as temporary condition, that is, a euphemism for sexual intercourse, but a permanent or lasting one. This permanence of the "one flesh" is further reinforced by the final "therefore"-admonition to maintain this new relationship. Finally, it is God who united the man and the woman, creating the "one flesh," and it is his will that this new relationship not be destroyed.

I CORINTHIANS 6:16

In I Cor. 6:16 Paul quotes Gen. 2:24, not in reference to marriage but in a discussion of sexual relations with a prostitute. He boldly compares the relationship with a prostitute, established by means of sexual intercourse, with the Christian's relationship with Christ.¹⁵ As v. 15 indicates, these two relationships are mutually exclusive, and their antithetical character is emphasized by Paul's use of "flesh" and "spirit."¹⁶

Essential to Paul's argument (and to his understanding of the "one flesh" idea) is his statement that sexual relations with a prostitute establish a union with her which he understands in terms of Gen. 2:24, namely, the "one flesh" (or "one body") relationship. This union disrupts the Christian's prior relationship with Christ which he describes as "one spirit." The Christian's body is a "member of Christ" and "is not meant for immorality but for the Lord." By taking the "members of Christ" and making them "members of a prostitute" a Christian establishes a union with the prostitute which is incompatible with his union with Christ.

From this passage, then, it is clear that for Paul "one flesh" is not synonymous with

14. The antecedent of the phrase "For this reason" is "made them male and female."

15. Cf. the parallel statements in vv. 16a and 17:

he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her,
he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him
The parallelism is even more apparent in the Greek.

16. "Flesh" and "spirit" are antithetical throughout Paul's letters; Cf. Rom. 8:1-14.

17. In relation to Paul's argument in this passage, Burkill, T.A. "Two into One: The Notion of Carnal Union in Mark 10:8; I Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31," *Zeitschrift fuer die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 62 (1971), p. 116, asks if becoming "one flesh" with a prostitute nullifies the presence of Christ, why should sexual intercourse within marriage not have the same consequences? This passage suggests, however, that for Paul the sexual relationship has its rightful place in God's creation and, when established according to his intention, can be a means of glorifying God in the body (v. 20); cf. Michel Bouttier, *Life in Christ and a New Creation*, translated by Frank Clarke (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 109.

marriage but is rather the consequence of sexual relations, even when these are with a prostitute. However, the parallelism between the “one flesh” (or “one body”) and the “one spirit” relationships suggests that Paul may understand the “one flesh” relationship to be an exclusive one which is disrupted by sexual relations outside of that relationship, just as the “one spirit” relationship with Christ is disrupted by sexual relations with a prostitute.¹⁷ This understanding of “one flesh” is supported in the following chapter where Paul refers to the sexual rights¹⁸ of each partner in a marriage. In 7:4f. he states that each partner in a marriage exercises authority¹⁹ over the body of the other. For this reason a person has no right to refuse sexual satisfaction to husband or wife (v.5). Husband and wife no longer rule over their own bodies but their bodies are under the authority of their partner. This understanding of the marriage relationship suggests an exclusiveness which is similar to that of the Christian’s relationship with his Lord in the previous chapter. It would also suggest that extra-marital sexual relationships would disrupt the exclusiveness of the “one flesh” relationship and violate the rights of the husband or wife of the person involved.

EPHESIANS 5:31

Gen. 2:24 is again cited in Eph. 5:31 within the *Haustafel* of 5:21-6:9. In the first portion of this *Haustafel* husbands and wives are directed to pattern their relationships to each other after the relationship between Christ and his church. Characteristic of this section is the alternation between Paul’s instructions to husbands and wives and his references to the example which he sets before them, namely, the relationship of Christ and the church. His statement that “He who loves his wife loves himself” (v.28b) suggests that his is thinking in terms of the “one flesh” relationship. If vv.29c-30 provide the example for Paul’s exhortation in vv.28-29b, v. 31, in which Paul quotes Gen. 2:24, is best understood as applying to the entire preceding section of the *Haustafel* (vv.21-30) and unifying it. These verses depict the proper relationship of husbands and wives as “one flesh,” citing the responsibilities of each within this relationship. However, after citing Gen. 2:24 in reference to the preceding directives, the author seizes upon the mystery of the “one flesh” of marriage and, in the manner characteristic of this section, uses it allegorically to express the mystery of the union of Christ and the church.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Old Testament materials and rabbinic literature clearly understand the “one flesh” relationship of man and woman in terms of human sexuality. The intense attraction of the sexes toward each other is explained aetiologically in terms of the dissection of Man into man and woman. Sexual drive is the natural yearning of man and woman for reunification and wholeness in sexual union.

The New Testament materials give evidence of other ideas associated with the term “one flesh.” The primary contribution of the synoptists is their emphasis upon the

18. *opheilen*.

19. *exousiazei*.

permanence of this “one flesh” relationship, that is, this union is a lasting consequence of the sexual relationship. This “one flesh” relationship is, at the same time, understood as the work of God and, as such, inviolable. There is, therefore, no ground for divorce, that is, for disrupting the “one flesh” relationship.

In I Corinthians 6 Paul indicates that the “one flesh” relationship is established by sexual intercourse and that such a relationship is established by even the most casual of sexual relations. He also indicated that sexual relations, which establish a “one flesh” relationship, disrupt prior unions which are incompatible with the new union. From the parallel structure of his discussion in chapter 6 and his comments on marriage in chapter 7 we may conclude that, for Paul, extra-marital sexual relationships disrupt the “one flesh” relationship of marriage in the same way that they disrupt the “one spirit” relationship of Christ and the Christian. It is also noteworthy that Paul in no way depreciates sexual relationships in themselves. They can, in fact, glorify God (v. 20).

Finally, in Ephesians 5:31, the “one flesh” relationship of marriage is elevated to the highest possible level by understanding it as an analogy for the relationship of Christ and the Church.

Although the Biblical materials provide insights into various aspects of the “one flesh” relationship, they nowhere deal directly with the actual nature or character of the relationship. However, Paul does, indirectly, give us an insight into his understanding of the nature of this relationship in I Corinthians 6 and 7. Throughout I Cor. 6:12-20 Paul refers to the relationship between Christ and the Christian in terms of their mutual purpose, namely, being “for” the other,²⁰ and of the Christian being united with (v.17) and belonging to Christ.²¹ In chapter 7 Paul speaks of the relationship between husband and wife in similar terms. He indicates that each partner in the marriage has sexual rights (v.4) and exercises authority over the body of the other. (v. 4). The expression “members of a prostitute” in 6:15b also suggests that, in Paul’s understanding, the “one flesh” relationship, established by means of sexual intercourse, effects a mutual belonging of the sexual partners to each other.²² These similarities between the relationship of Christ and the church and that of the partners in a sexual relationship reinforce the observations made concerning the parallel statements:

he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her.

he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

It may be concluded, then, that these two relationships are similar in character and that insights gained from one may possibly be applicable to the other.

On the basis of a comparison of the two relationships of the “one flesh” of the sexual relationship and the “one spirit” of the relationship between Christ and the Christian, it appears that, for Paul, the essential character of the “one flesh” relationship is that of mutual belonging to and responsibility toward the (marriage) partner. Through their sexual relationship, and specifically through sexual intercourse,

20. *to de soma ... to kyrio, kai ho kyrios to somati.*

21. *mele [tou] Christou*

22. Note that the expression “members of a prostitute” (*pornes mele*) is a parallel expression to “members of Christ” (*mele [tou] Christou*).

man and woman are united in a relationship of mutual belonging to and possession of and by the other partner.

If this Pauline understanding of the term “one flesh” can be applied to the other New Testament passages in which it occurs, some of the unexplained assumptions become more apparent. The permanence of the “one flesh” relationship stressed in the synoptic gospels is understandable if this expression refers to a mutual belonging to and possession of and by the marriage partner and the responsibilities assumed within this relationship. The New Testament attitude toward divorce is also clarified; there can be no divorce because they belong to each other. The “except-clauses” of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 are also illuminated by this understanding of the “one flesh” relationship since extra-marital sexual relationships disrupt the mutual belonging of the marriage partners to each other by taking what belongs to the one and making it the possession of the extra-marital sexual partner. Finally, the reason for understanding the relationship between Christ and the church as being analogous to the relationship of husband and wife in Eph. 5:31f. becomes more understandable. The similarity of the two relationships is to be found in the mutual belonging to and responsibility toward the partner in the relationship.

It may be concluded, then, that in Paul, and perhaps also the rest of the New Testament, sexual intercourse is associated with a mutual surrendering of the self to the other partner which results in a new relationship of mutual belonging to and responsibility toward the other person, namely, the “one flesh” relationship. The permanence of this relationship is probably to be understood, first, in terms of the mutual surrendering of the self to the other, which cannot be reversed, in sexual intercourse, and second, in terms of God’s creative design for the relationship between man and woman.