

5. CONCLUSION

Due to the nature of our topic, most of our time has been spent on marriage problems and divorce and remarriage. Let us in closing remind each other that marriage is one of the most beautiful gifts God has given us at creation. Although also marriage has been affected by the fall into sin, yet Christ also redeems marriage and office bearers may be God's instruments in rescuing marriages from the devastating effects of sin. Indeed, in the pastoral work one can point to that great marriage feast of the lamb to which all history moves and to which we have been invited.

APPENDIX A: ONE FLESH

At the foundation of the argument that marriage is indissoluble except by death is the idea that husband and wife are “one flesh”, that is, they are related by blood. Such a bond of kinship as exists between a parent and a child also exists between a husband and a wife and can not be undone.

As Wenham puts it in his Leviticus commentary:

Marriage, or more precisely marital intercourse, makes the man and wife as closely related as parents and children. In the words of Gen 2:24, “they become one flesh”. Marriage thus creates both vertical blood relationships in the form of children and horizontal “blood” relationships between the spouses.¹

Heth and Wenham state in their joint publication, *Jesus and Divorce*:

Just as we cannot ‘divorce’ our children from being our own blood relations, no matter how disreputable they may be, so a man cannot ‘divorce’ his wife who is his own flesh and blood through marriage.²

According to this view, this “one flesh” bond therefore survives legal and customary divorce. In other words, “a man cannot ‘divorce’ his wife who is his own flesh and blood through marriage”.³ Let us take a close look at how Heth and Wenham’s ideas measure up in the light of Scripture.

¹ Wenham, *Leviticus*, 255.

² Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 110, also see 100-103. Also see Heth in Kantzer, ed, *Applying the Scriptures*, 221.

³ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 110.

GENESIS 2:23-24

An important passage for determining the meaning of “one flesh” is obviously Genesis 2:23-24.

23. 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.”

24. Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

What exactly does “one flesh” mean here? The most common (and I believe correct) view is that it refers to “the bondedness which results from and is expressed in the sexual union”.⁴ The claim has however been made that such a view has no lexical support.⁵

According to Heth and Wenham, “one flesh” must be related to and interpreted in the light of Adam’s exclamation “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23). Since being someone’s flesh or blood was a common expression to denote kinship or blood relations (e.g., Gen 29:12-14; 37:27), the expression “one flesh” must (according to this line of reasoning) also denote kinship or blood relationship. This one flesh relationship is a kinship that is based on the covenant of marriage and the consummation of marriage.⁶

Let us now examine these two basic points, namely that the expression “one flesh” means a blood relationship because it means the same as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23) and secondly that “one flesh” cannot for lexical reasons refer to the

⁴ So M. Gilbert, A. van Selms, J. de Fraine and others as detailed by G. P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant* (VTSup 52; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 162. Apart from the possible allusion to sexual union in Gen 2:24, the expression “one flesh” never has this meaning elsewhere. Cf. Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant*, 161.

⁵ Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant*, 162.

⁶ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 101-102. Also see Heth in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 225-226.

bondedness of man and wife which results from and is expressed in sexual union.

The Context of Genesis 2:23

The basic context of the passage under consideration is that God wants to make for Adam “a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). Such a helper is a helper in the broadest possible sense (and not just with respect to work or begetting descendants).⁷ “The man is created by God in such a way that he needs the help of a partner”.⁸

The Hebrew translated by “fit for him” literally means “as his counterpart”, “as corresponding to him”. An equal to Adam, who will form as it were “one-half of a polarity”.⁹ Since the context is also one of loneliness, one could also say that this means that without the helper, Adam would be wanting and incomplete. The woman completes man.

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.”
(Gen 2:23)

After the loneliness experienced in seeing no counterpart or helper fit for him with the animals, Adam rejoices at the gift of woman from the hand of God. She is completely different from the animals whom Adam had been naming but among which he could not find a help meet. She is of his flesh and blood. We could say, they are of one blood (similarly Acts 17:26). In that sense a blood relationship is here in view. Overagainst the animal world, here is another human being. Or as it is put in Gen 1:27,

⁷ The Hebrew term for “helper” is also used of God (e.g., in Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7; Ps 20:3). Cf. Ecclesiastes 4:10 “For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up.”

⁸ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (J. Scullion, trans.: Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 227.

⁹ V. P. Hamilton, *Book of Genesis Chapters 1- 17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 175.

“God created man ... male and female He created them”. Both male and female are man or humankind or human being, distinct from God and animals.¹⁰

The words of Adam in Genesis 2:23 are all the more fitting when one realizes that the woman was literally taken out of the side of Adam. In light of the above, it would appear doubtful whether one can justify the position that “one flesh” in the specific marital context of Genesis 2:24 is the same as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” in Genesis 2:23 which speaks of the woman’s identity as related to man and separate from the animal world. The contexts are different.¹¹

The Context of Genesis 2:24

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gen 2:24)

“Therefore” links this verse with the preceding and shows that marriage is ordained by God to take effect between two human beings and not, e.g. between a human and an animal. (Think of the prohibition of bestiality in Lev 18:23; 20:15f.)¹² In view of the larger context, the “therefore” also shows that because woman comes from man and is to be his counterpart and helpmeet (reflected in Adam’s joy at receiving Woman), therefore a man will leave the parental home to become “one flesh” with his wife. In light of the context, this “one flesh” refers to the unity that is to be experienced between man and wife in marriage in view of her being a helper fit for man and completing him.

¹⁰ Also see W. H. Gispen, *Genesis I* (COT; Kampen: Kok, 1974) 128-129.

¹¹ When Heth and Wenham (*Jesus and Divorce*, 101) suggest by association that the phrase “one flesh” denotes kinship or blood relations, this point is never proven. The passages referred to speak of “flesh and blood” (Gen 29:12-14; 37:27; Judg 9:2; 2 Sam 19:13). These expressions are different from what is found in Gen 2:23 and they refer to kinship, the common blood bond. However, it still needs to be shown that “one flesh” in Gen 2:24 means that as well. See also Heth, in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 225.

¹² Also see Gispen, *Genesis*, I, 130-131.

In other words, man by himself is not one flesh, and woman by herself is not one flesh.¹³ But together they are one flesh and form a complete whole. This unity refers to more than the sexual communion although it is included.

This expression “one flesh”, as it is used in Genesis 2, does not have as purpose to state that man and wife are like brother and sister, together one flesh. Such an understanding is simply not in view here. To insist on it is to do violence to the obvious intent and meaning of this part of Scripture. It is forcing a meaning on the text that is not natural.

It has been well put with respect to our passage:

Together they form one complete unit. As they come together physically, intellectually, emotionally, there is a wholeness that did not exist before. ... God created a helper who was exactly fitted to the man He had created, so that when the two would come together they would complete one another and they would be whole.¹⁴

In other words the “one flesh” is descriptive of the bond between husband and wife, a bond that is seen in sexual union, but includes much more than that. It refers also specifically to the fact that whereas they are individually incomplete and lonely and unable to function according to God’s design for them, together they can function as one unit. She is a helper fit for him (and we may assume he is to be a helper to her)¹⁵. One unit. There is to be no rivalry, no opposition. They match each other and complement each other perfectly. It is as if they are one body. They are one flesh. This physical description points to a total unity (and not to a familial relationship as exists between parent and child).

¹³ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1- 17*, 181.

¹⁴ J. E. Adams, *Christian Living in the Home* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 48.

¹⁵ Cf. the Marriage Form in the *Book of Praise. Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1984), 636-637.

Lexical Evidence

Does the term “flesh” occur elsewhere with the meaning that seems to be demanded by the context of Gen 2:24, namely, of one functioning unit, one “personality” that is complete and can therefore do what is expected? The answer is yes.¹⁶

In his standard grammar, Friedrich Eduard Köning understands the use of “one flesh” in Genesis 2:24 as a poetic use of the part for the whole (*pars pro toto*) for “bodily unit, person”. He also gives other references with a similar meaning.¹⁷ In his commentary on Genesis, he translates “and they will become one individual.”¹⁸ I understand this to mean, one life unit, one entity of sharing and living life together.

H. W. Wolf, referring to Genesis 2:24 correctly interprets man and wife becoming “one flesh” as “a common body, ‘a fellowship for life’”.¹⁹

This meaning for Genesis 2:24 can be supported by other references from the Old Testament as, for instance, Psalm 63:1.

O God, thou art my God, I seek thee, my soul thirsts for thee;
my flesh faints for thee, as in a dry and weary land where no water is.

Note how “my flesh” and “my soul” are in parallel relationship. “Flesh” here therefore designates the entire person, one personality. The same meaning is covered as by the word “soul”.

A similar usage of the image of flesh referring to one entire

¹⁶ This is not to deny that the obvious meaning of “flesh” as “substance of body” lies behind this meaning in Genesis 2:24. As we saw, also the idea of blood relation is there, namely that man, male and female, is of one blood (Acts 17:26) and separate from the animal world.

¹⁷ Lev 13:18; Ps 63:2b; Neh 5:5a. F. E. König, *Historisch-Kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache*, Vol. III (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1979 [1897]), 4.

¹⁸ E. König, E., *Die Genesis* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1919), 215.

¹⁹ H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (M. Kohl, trans.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 29.

person is found in other Psalms, such as Psalm 84:2; Psalm 38:3a and 119:20.

Moving to other parts of Scripture, Leviticus 13:18, 24 refers to boils or burns occurring on the body (lit. “flesh”); Numbers 8:7 refers to shaving the whole body (lit “flesh”), similarly Job 4:15 speaks of hair standing on end on the body (lit “flesh”).²⁰

In light of the above there is no lexical reason why “one flesh” cannot refer to a single corporeal entity. Since a synecdoche (a figure of speech expressing a part for the whole) is involved in Genesis 2:24, the single entity “one flesh” can refer to the marriage bond expressed as a single body or fellowship of life.

LEVITICUS 18 AND 21

Heth and Wenham have attempted to use Leviticus 18, which details unlawful sexual relations, as an illustration of the application of Genesis 2:24, namely, that the “one flesh” relationship of husband and wife is a kindred (i.e. “blood”) relationship such as exists between parents and their children. They deduce this from the fact that various prohibitions in Leviticus 18 are not only predicated on literal blood lines, but also on relationships created through marriage.²¹ However, they do not prove their point.

In the first place, the Old Testament never speaks of husband and wife as blood relatives and it is striking that Leviticus 21:2-3 defines “his blood” or as it is usually translated “nearest of kin” as “his mother, his

²⁰ See further Wolf, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 28-29; H.-J. Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (K. Crim, trans.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986 [1979]), 144-145. Also cf. W. Brueggemann, “Of the Same Flesh and Blood”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970) 540.

²¹ Heth in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 226; Wenham, *Leviticus*, 255; idem, “The Restoration of Marriage Reconsidered”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 30 (1979) 36-40.

father, his son, his daughter, his brother, or his virgin sister who is near to him because she has had no husband". It is noteworthy that his wife is not specifically mentioned. She may be assumed to be covered by the exceptions mentioned due to the special relationship she has with her husband; they are one.²² Nevertheless, her not being expressly listed shows that she does not come immediately to mind and is in a different category from the blood relationship of those mentioned.²³

Secondly, the fact that the levirate marriage was commanded by God indicates that the relationship of man and wife in marriage was not the same as the relationship of blood. The Lord never made an exception for the prohibition of marrying a blood sister, grand daughter, aunt, (all these were incest), but he did allow the marriage of a widow to her brother-in-law (Deut 25:5-10; cf. Gen 38:8-10). This exception shows that God made a distinction between the relationship of husband and wife and the actual blood relationship that existed in the blood family.²⁴

Thirdly, Heth is on weak ground when he states the following:
The moment a man married a woman she became an integral part of his family in the same way in which children born into that family do. Similarly he became related to her close female relatives, and should his wife die or should he divorce her, he could not marry them, for that would be a form of incest.²⁵

These comments show the consequences of such thinking, but what about Leviticus 18:18 which states that he cannot marry the wife's sister "while the wife is alive" but which implies that it is all right to marry the sister-in-law after the wife's death. Heth is reading more into Scripture than it says.²⁶ Furthermore, a reason given for not marrying

²² Gispén, *Leviticus*, 301; Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, II, 429-430. It is noteworthy that Ezek 44:25 also does not include the wife of the priest.

²³ See Kellogg, *Leviticus*, 384.

²⁴ So correctly Kellogg, *Leviticus*, 384.

²⁵ Heth in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 226-227.

²⁶ So also Hoehner in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 242.

her while his wife is still alive is to avoid vexing her or to avoid rousing her to jealousy by this rival wife.²⁷ Nothing is said here about the type of relationship Heth has in mind.

DEUTERONOMY 24:1-4

In this passage, God forbids a husband to take back his wife whom he has divorced after her second husband divorces her or dies. According to Heth and Wenham the reason for the fact that the first marriage cannot be restored after a woman has been divorced by a second husband is because it would be a form of incest. After all the first marriage made her a close relative of her first husband.²⁸

Just as we cannot “divorce” our children from being our own flesh and blood no matter how disreputable or immoral they may be, so a man cannot “divorce” his wife who is his own flesh and blood (cf. Lev 18:7-8) through the covenant and consummation of marriage.²⁹

However, all this is reading more into the text than the passage says. Other explanations for the refusal of remarriage to the original husband are possible. Most probably, this legislation is God’s way of restraining marriage breakup. Also, Deuteronomy 24:1-4 shows that the first marriage was truly permanently dissolved with the remarriage of a man’s wife. He cannot have her back. This permanent dissolving of a marriage is a truth Heth and Wenham basically deny.

Furthermore Heth’s reasoning makes no sense. If remarriage is not possible because that would constitute incest, what about a married

²⁷ Lev 18:18 can be literally translated “And you shall not marry a woman in addition to her sister to make her jealous while she is alive to uncover her nakedness” (cf. NASB and Gispén, *Leviticus*, 267). Cf. Jacob’s marriage to two sisters, Rachel and Leah (Gen 29-30).

²⁸ Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 110.

²⁹ Heth in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 228.

couple who are presumably already in a close flesh and blood relationship? Are they then committing incest because they are married?³⁰

OLD TESTAMENT CONCLUSION

The approach of Heth and Wenham in seeing “one flesh” in Genesis 2:24 refer to the establishment of a new blood relation finds no support in the Old Testament. Rather, as stated earlier “one flesh” in Gen 2:24 is descriptive of the bond between husband and wife, a bond that is seen in sexual union, but includes much more than that. It refers also specifically to the fact that whereas they are individually incomplete and lonely and unable to function according to God’s design for them, together they can function as one unit. She is a helper fit for him (and we may assume he is to be a helper to her). “One flesh” points to a total unity and not in the first instance to a familial relationship.

“ONE FLESH” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

How is Genesis 2:24 used in the New Testament? Does the New Testament usage support the contention that the marriage bond is indissoluble because the “one flesh” refers to a new blood relationship? Genesis 2:24 is quoted or referred to in Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7-8, 1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31. For our purposes here we need only look at the last two.

³⁰ For this line of thinking see Hoehner in Kantzer, ed., *Applying the Scriptures*, 243.

1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31

In a well known admonition, the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:15-18

15. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!

16. Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two shall become one flesh.”

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

18. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body.

It is clear that the apostle here in his warning against association with prostitutes refers to “one flesh”, meaning the physical sexual union. At the same time he shows that much more than that is involved. There is also the “spiritual” unity, that is, a coming together in the sense that you identify with the other and become one entity with such a person. This is evident from the context. Paul says that the physical bodies of Christians are members of Christ and thus should never be made a member of a prostitute (v. 15-16). At the same time, he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him, body and soul (v.17, cf. v. 15). Now what belongs to Christ cannot be shared with a prostitute. By becoming one physical flesh with her, one also identifies with the mindset, outlook, and world of the prostitute. In that sense, if one can use the term, one becomes “spiritually” one with her. This double aspect of body and “spirit” is presupposed in the apostle’s admonition and without it, it loses its force and urgency. Therefore, one cannot at the same time serve Christ with the spirit and serve yourself and a prostitute with the body. Man is a unit.³¹

In conclusion, there is nothing in the usage of Genesis 2:24 in 1 Corinthians 6:16 to indicate that “one flesh” means a physical and actual

³¹ On 1 Corinthians 6:15-18 see further C. H. Lindijer, *Het Begrip sarx bij Paulus* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1952) 121-123.

blood bond that is being established.³²

Such is also the case in Ephesians 5:31 which occurs in a rich exposition of Christian marriage in verses 22-33. Husbands are exhorted to love their wives as their own bodies as Christ loves his church whose members are members of his body. Then follows the words, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Eph 5:31). That is, a Christian marriage is to reflect something of the great love of the Bridegroom Jesus Christ for His bride, the church. It is a great mystery but the becoming one flesh refers to Christ and the church (v. 32). This union is a spiritual one (cf., e.g., 1 Cor 6:17) and does not speak of a physical blood bond or kinship.³³

NEW TESTAMENT CONCLUSION

There is nothing in the New Testament usage of Genesis 2:24 to indicate that “one flesh” means that a blood bond is being or has been established so that the husband and wife are now blood relatives of each other.

³² This is basically acknowledged in Heth and Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce*, 150.

³³ See further, e.g., P. S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) 218-220. On the question whether Eph 5:30 ended with “of His flesh and of His bones” see P. R. Rodgers, “The Allusion to Genesis 2:23 at Ephesians 5:30”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 41 (1990) 92-94.