

## **The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD**

### **Episode 153–The Christology of the Covenantal Groom**

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### **Introduction**

We have been exploring the unique depictions of God and the Lamb within the Book of Revelation as of late on the BUP. One of the major emphases in Revelation, which is only touched upon in other NT documents, is the covenant’s metaphor of marriage, wherein the Lamb acts as the husband and the believing people of God are the bride. This theology is spoken of more frequently in Revelation than in the Gospels and in Paul. Some interpreters have pointed out that, within the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh himself is the husband in the covenant. In the NT, however, Jesus is always the husband. This has led some interpreters to conclude that Jesus *is* God, prompting an extremely high Christology.

In this week’s episode of the BUP, we will explore how the covenant is portrayed in terms of a marriage between a bride and a groom. Both the Hebrew Bible and the NT will be examined to see who acts as the husband, who is depicted as the bride, and if there are any discernible shifts between the two testaments. Does the NT’s portrayal of Jesus as the covenantal husband indicate that Jesus is, in fact, Yahweh himself? Or should the response be more nuanced than that?

Let’s find out on this week’s episode of the BUP!

## 1. God as the Covenantal Groom in the Hebrew Bible

- a. *Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; And do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; But you will forget the shame of your youth, And the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more. "For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the LORD of hosts; And your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, Who is called the God of all the earth. "For the LORD has called you, Like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit, Even like a wife of one's youth when she is rejected," Says your God. "For a brief moment I forsook you, But with great compassion I will gather you. "In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, But with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you," Says the LORD your Redeemer. (Isa 54:4-8)*
  - i. The husband is the creator, Yahweh himself
  - ii. The wife is the nation of Israel
  - iii. Tension in the covenant due to Israel's unfaithful behavior
- b. *It will no longer be said to you, "Forsaken," Nor to your land will it any longer be said, "Desolate"; But you will be called, "My delight is in her," And your land, "Married"; For the LORD delights in you, And to Him your land will be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, So your sons will marry you; And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So your God will rejoice over you. (Isa 62:4-5)*
  - i. The husband is Yahweh, specifically the God of the Jews
  - ii. The Bride is the Jewish people
- c. *"Then I passed by you and saw you, and behold, you were at the time for love; so I spread My skirt over you and covered your nakedness. I also swore to you and entered into a covenant with you so that you became Mine," declares the Lord GOD. "Then I bathed you with water, washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. "I also clothed you with embroidered cloth and put sandals of porpoise skin on your feet; and I wrapped you with fine linen and covered you with silk. "I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your hands and a necklace around your neck. "I also put a ring in your nostril, earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. "Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your dress was of fine linen, silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour, honey and oil; so you were exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. "Then your fame went forth among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of My splendor which I bestowed on you," declares the Lord GOD. "But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your fame, and you poured out your harlotries on every passer-by who might be willing. "You took some of your clothes, made for yourself high places of various colors and played the harlot on them, which should never come about nor happen. (Ezek 16:8-16)*

- i. Yahweh is the husband, and much effort is spent describing how good the husband was to his bride
  - ii. Israel, the bride, acted unfaithfully in this covenant, resulting in Israel being described as a harlot
- d. *"I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, In lovingkindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD. (Hos 2:19-20)*
  - i. Yahweh is the husband, who promises in a passage of covenant renewal, to betroth his people in righteousness and justice
  - ii. The bride is the people of God

Based on the marriage metaphor within the covenant as we see in the Hebrew Bible, we can safely draw some conclusions. First, the groom/husband is Yahweh himself. Second, the bride/wife is the nation of Israel. Third, the bride has not been faithful to the covenant, prompting God to issue promises of renewal and restoration. We will have to see what the NT has to say about this renewed covenant.

## 2. Jesus as the Covenantal Groom in the New Testament

- a. *Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. "And he sent out his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding feast, and they were unwilling to come. "Again he sent out other slaves saying, 'Tell those who have been invited, "Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fattened livestock are all butchered and everything is ready; come to the wedding feast."' "But they paid no attention and went their way, one to his own farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. "But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire. "Then he said to his slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy. 'Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast.' "Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered together all they found, both evil and good; and the wedding hall was filled with dinner guests. "But when the king came in to look over the dinner guests, he saw a man there who was not dressed in wedding clothes, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you come in here without wedding clothes?' And the man was speechless. "Then the king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matt. 22:1-14)*

- i. The covenant is now related to the kingdom of God, which is to be expected since many of the passages we read from the Hebrew Bible spoke of a time of restoration in regard to the covenant renewal.
  - ii. We also see that a king offers a wedding feast for his son. It is the son who is getting married. The king would represent God, and his son, the son of God, could refer to either Israel or to the Israelite ruler, the Messiah. Since it is unlikely that Israel, which formerly took the bride role, could be the male in the wedding, it strongly suggests that the son refers to the Messiah, Israel's ruler.
  - iii. The bride is not mentioned
  - iv. God has given a wedding feast for the messianic ruler, the son of God
  - v. God and his son remain distinct, and they are not collapsed into a single being.
- b. *John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?" And Jesus said to them, "While the bridegroom is with them, the attendants of the bridegroom cannot fast, can they? So long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. "But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. (Mark 2:18-20)*
  - i. Upon answering John's disciples and the Pharisees regarding the reason why Jesus does not fast, Jesus speaks of himself as the groom.
  - ii. No mention of the bride
  - iii. There is a cryptic reference to a time when the groom will be taken away, at that time there will be fasting and presumably mourning. This is almost certainly a veiled reference to the death of Jesus.
- c. *"He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full... "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand. (John 3:29, 34-35)*
  - i. John the Baptist speaks of himself as the friend of the bridegroom, almost as if John is the best man at the wedding
  - ii. The groom is the son of God
  - iii. The bride is mentioned, but the text is not as clear as to whom the bride refers.
  - iv. While the son functions as the groom, we also learn that the Father has given all things into the hands of the son, indicating that this prerogative, formerly belonging to God alone, has now been given to Jesus.
  - v. God and Jesus remain distinct.

- d. *For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin.* (2 Cor 11:2)
  - i. Paul regards Christ as the groom
  - ii. The Christians in Corinth are the bride, the pure virgin
  - iii. Paul sees that he has a personal role in this relationship, stating that he betrothed the believers to Christ. This indicates that Paul, who converted the believers, acted as a father of sorts to this young virgin daughter.
- e. *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready." "It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God."* (Rev 19:7-9)
  - i. In Revelation, where the bride and groom metaphor is the strongest in the New Testament, the Lamb functions as the groom
  - ii. The faithful people of God are the bride
  - iii. Moreover, God and the Lamb remain distinct
- f. *And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.* (Rev 21:2)
  - i. The bride is the holy city, New Jerusalem, which draws on the Hebrew Bible's habit of portraying the people of God collectively as a city, like Jerusalem or Zion. Based on the theology of the Book of Revelation, the conquering people of God, as defined by the Lamb, are defined as New Jerusalem. So the NT people of God are both the bride and city.
  - ii. The husband is the Lamb
  - iii. Of noteworthiness, the city descends from God for the husband, this distinguishing God and the Lamb.
- g. *Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God* (Rev 21:9-10)
  - i. Much of the same--the bride is the heavenly city, new Jerusalem.
  - ii. The Lamb is the groom.
  - iii. And the city descends from God, thereby distinguishing God and the Lamb.

### **In conclusion, we have observed that...**

The Bible frequently portrays the relationship between God and his people in terms of the covenant, and quite often, this covenant relationship is depicted in terms of a marriage between a man and a woman.

We first noted that the Old Covenant regarded the husband as Yahweh himself, while the bride referred to the children of Israel. This occurred within the highly poetic sections of the prophets. While God remained faithful in this marriage metaphor, Israel proved faithless, resulting in prophecies uttered that promised restoration and renewal.

Second, we observed two interesting shifts in the marriage metaphor upon examining the NT data. Jesus Christ has now taken the role of the covenant husband and the believing church is now portrayed as the covenant bride. This seemed to be the natural progression in the renewal of the covenant, as the terms of the covenant are now defined by Jesus' teachings and the boundary markers of the covenant recipients are based on faith, rather than race.

Third, we saw that Jesus' replacement of God in the role as the husband/groom was told in the manner of God handing the role over to Jesus. Matthew portrayed the shift in terms of God giving a wedding banquet for his son. The Gospel of John described it in terms of the Father giving all things into the hands of the Son. Furthermore, the Book of Revelation depicted this shift in terms of the bride descending from God, made ready for the Lamb. In other words, God's role as the groom within the marriage metaphor of the covenant has been given over to Jesus.

Lastly, we observed that while Jesus has been authorized to function as the groom, the NT was clear to distinguish God and Jesus when discussing Jesus' new role. By portraying Jesus as the groom, the NT does not collapse God and Jesus into a single being. In other words, the NT's portrayal of Jesus as the covenant groom is not identifying Jesus as God, but rather indicating that God has highly authorized the son of God with a divine prerogative.

The depiction of Jesus as the authorized recipient of God's role as the covenant husband is consistent with a high human Christology, but it is incompatible with a trinitarian Christology.

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Thanks for tuning into this week's episode of the BUP!

Join us next week as we look at what the Book of Revelation means when it portrays Jesus as the Word of God. Does the logos theology from the Fourth Gospel reappear in the Book of Revelation? Please look forward to this episode!

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