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SEX AND LOVE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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WHEN the title for this lecture was announced some people were intrigued by it, and wondered what I meant by it and why I made this distinction. It is a symptom of what is the current idea at the present about sex and love. I insist on this distinction, because it is precisely here where the origin of the confusion that exists in the connexion lies. In rejecting the non-Christian, but rather manichaeian accretions, to genuine Christian interpretation of sex and the morality stemming therefrom, modern man has jettisoned the fundamental concept of sex as an expression of that genuine love which binds two intelligent and free individuals in the bond of marriage; reducing thus sex to a commodity to be traded as any other commodity on the market of entertainment to the satisfaction of man's, or for that matter woman's egoism, with all the well-known consequences for individual, domestic and social life.

It is therefore of vital importance for us Christians to reassess the traditional teaching and practice, to separate the chaff from the wheat; remove the first and store the latter.

This is precisely the purpose of this paper: it is an attempt to see what the Bible has to say on the matter. The vastness of the subject and the innumerable problems involved would not permit me to go all over the Biblical tradition; I limit myself to the O.T. period, because herein are the roots of the Christian concept of sex and love, which found its full development in the New Testament ideal of Christian Marriage.

It was not a concept that emerged only gradually and not without pain and struggle against the forces of man's egoism and his strong tenden-

cy towards self-satisfaction at the expence of other human beings, especially women treated not as persons, but as instruments for one's own pleasure and interests.

Throughout our paper we shall see how the people of Israel, conscious of its own spiritual mission, gradually but steadily, notwithstanding its ups and downs, starting from the rather crude concept of sex as a cold means for procreation and pleasure, they arrived to a higher concept of sex as an expression of love between two persons bound together by love for all their lives, preparing the way for the uncompromising attitude of Jesus in this matter.

We start with the legal provisions defining the external relations between husband and wife – we limit ourselves to this only – going to consider their sexual relationship and ending with the love, or spiritual or moral relationship between the two.

THE EXTERNAL – LEGAL OR CUSTOMARY – RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

The head of the family in Old Testament was obviously the father, on whose will depended the members of the whole household. A woman in such a household could have one of these three statuses, beginning with lowest: she may be just a slave captured in war or bought on the public market; she was at the disposal of her master, except that the law tried to lighten her burden Dt 21, 10-13. Next in order was the Hebrew concubine, who was sold to her master by her father to pay off his debts. This was not unusual; Exodus 21, 7-11 makes legal provisions to limit the rights of her master, who may have her as his own concubine, or give her to his sons. Under no circumstances he could sell her, unless to a Hebrew master. Then there was the wife with her own rights and duties. The man procured his wife, not by just purchase as in the case of the slave, but by arrangement with her parents and the payment of the compensation money, *mohar*; she enjoyed rights and privileges such as the others did not; she could live in her own tent, possess property, and have her own maid servants. We have perfect examples of this in the families of the Patriarchs: Genesis 29-30 Jacob had to work not less than 14 years to have his beloved Rachel, with her maid servant; and Leah, whom he did not like very much. One can here add another type of woman: the prostitute or harlot, who traded herself to all and sundry, without any dishonour to either side being attached.

This was the legal, so to say, arrangement of the Hebrew family; it is a neat order, on paper, but in actual fact, this arrangement caused a lot of inconvenience and disorder within the family: the wife may be reduced to a status of concubine and the concubine to the status of wife, as the patriarchal families, again, abundantly prove.

Two problems arise here. What was the purpose of so many women in the house, and what was the nature of the relationship between the man and his wives or concubines?

Various reasons have been adduced to explain polygamy: just lust, surplus of women, economic asset, prestige, political alliances, desire for an heir or offspring. All these may be true in individual cases, but obviously not in all. In the Biblical evidence the main object is offspring, especially in the Patriarchal period; political alliances and prestige in the monarchy period; the kings and the higher richer classes: Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines! — In between these two extremes we find that the ordinary man may have had two, and no more, 1 Sam 1, 2. This institution as we see further on went on declining, until it was only the rich that could permit themselves this luxury (Herod the Great had ten wives after the death of his first wife Marianne, who did not allow another woman in the palace.

What was the nature of the relationship of a man with his womenfolk? Was it a purely legal relation or a sentimental one? Obviously both of them could exist side by side, and the one may rise as the result of the other. It is quite clear that the relation between the man and his slave or concubine was simply a relation of property; in this case the girl was simply a chattel, which could be disposed of at will: Hagar was treated no better. Similar cases are Genesis 16 and the concubine of the Levite in Judges 19.

As to the wife the problem is not so clear cut. Some maintain, in view of the fact that in the decalogue she is bracketed with one's property: You shall not covet your neighbour's house: your neighbour's wife, his slave-girl, his ox, his ass, or anything that belongs to him, that he may displace her by another woman or sell her. But we have no evidence of any wife being sold; nor of a substitution of the wife by another one.

On the other hand the wife takes the name of her husband, (Is 4, 1ff.), which was not the case of the concubine; and he is not called *adon*, master in his relationship to his servant or slave, but *ba'al*, which does

not mean an absolute master. Hence one would conclude that the husband's 'property right' on his wife are limited to her in so far as her sexuality is concerned, for the rest she is mistress of herself, otherwise she was in no sense a chattel. She had however to acknowledge the authority of her husband in the household. The above mentioned provision in the decalogue should be interpreted in this sense. We have evidence, as in the case of Abigail, e.g. 1 Sam 25 where the wife asserted herself in virtue of her undoubted natural talents.

An important corollary from this follows: that infidelity on the part of the husband legally was non-existent; nor do we find any moral condemnation, except when the rights of another man over his wife were violated, either actively by a third party or passively by the wife herself in surrendering herself.

This was the legal set up of the Hebrew Family in which the male had the upper hand, and the last word in the running of the household. The Law provided checks to this overriding authority; and in this it was an advance on the situation prevailing amongst their pagan neighbours in this matter. But beside the law there were other forces working within the Hebrew Community.

THE USE OF SEX

The institution of marriage as we have just described it has as its origin the mutual attraction of the sexes leading to union of man and wife with the express purpose of bringing it under control. Ancient man felt awe in the presence of this impetuous force within himself and deified it, as indeed he did with other forces of nature.

Hence he attributed the principle of sexuality to the Gods themselves; whence the belief in Gods and Goddesses; creation itself is the result of divine sexual union: mother earth is fertilized by the father God. But since human experience shows that beside the purpose of procreation there is the attraction between man and woman even outside the institution of marriage, which they attributed to the Gods also, they believed that this holds good also in the divine sphere, hence the worship of Ishtar, Aphrocuté or Venus – Now these are three distinct aspects of sexuality, namely companionship, sex, progeny which were never integrated in one single ideal couple: each element was hallowed, but never united.

These beliefs were expressed in the fertility rites common in the per-

iod from the Mediterranean to India, Malta not excepted. These rites provide a dramatic reproduction of the sexual life of the gods rendering it possible for man to enter into the sphere of the divine, thereby stimulating fertility within himself, the animals and plants around him. Hence there is the institution of the sacred prostitution within their shrines; the chief among them is the sacred marriage of the king at the beginning of the New Year with the priestess in the temple. Through these sexual unions with the sacred priestesses, or even priests, they believed that their own reproductive powers are revitalized for the rest of the year.

These sacred rites, widely practised by the Canaanites amongst whom the Israelites lived, could not but exercise a strong attraction, if not infatuation on them, as the protests of their spiritual leaders amply prove. As in other cases, faced with the problem of the sacralization of sex leading to apostasy and idolatry, the spiritual leaders of the nation elaborated a positive theory of sex that opened the way to a higher concept of it.

The basic article of faith in Israel's Creed was that God is completely transcendent, ever-present in nature but not to be identified with any creature or natural force; hence there is no place for sexuality in God: He is one and unique, without any consort beside him. Creation, is not due to any divine sexual intercourse, but simply to his word. Sex itself is a creature of God.

'So God created man (*adam* אָדָם) in his own image;
in the image of God created him
male (זָכָר) and female (נְקֵבָה) created them.

(Gen. 1, 26-27)

As a corollary of this any sexual practice with a religious connotation – such as sacred prostitution, Dt 23, 18-19 or sexual union with animals, Ex 22, 18; Dt 27, 21; Lev 18, 23 was strictly forbidden.

This is what we today call secularization, but a genuine one, which does not deny the religious function of creation in relation to God. The basic texts for this are the two texts the later one (5th century B.C.) in Genesis 1, 26-27 already quoted and the other, about the 10th century, in Genesis 2, 7, the well-known account of the formation of Eve:

'Thus the man gave names to all cattle, to the birds of heaven, and to every wild animal; but for the man himself no partner had yet been

found. And so the Lord God put the man into a trance, and while he slept, he took one of his ribs and closed the flesh over the place. The Lord God then built up the rib, which he had taken out of the man, into a woman. He brought her to the man, and the man said:

Now this, at last –
bone from my bones,
flesh (כֶּסֶף) from my flesh,
this shall be called woman,
for from man was this taken.

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Now they were both naked the man and his wife, but they had no feeling of shame.' (Gen 2, 19-25).

This text, a masterpiece of its own kind presents us with a picture of two individuals of the same nature and dignity bound intimately together into one person, of the same nature, because Eve, was taken out of the *flesh* of the man, not simply the *dust*, אֶפְרָא out of which man was formed, but of the *living* flesh; before her creation man could not find a fitting partner for himself, now, he found it in Eve, the woman. God himself presents Eve to Adam, that they may become one flesh, one person; (about this further on). They were not ashamed of their nakedness; they were not yet corrupted by the fertility cults symbolised by the serpent: cults which reduced the woman as a subservient creature if not slave to man; yet her cravings are still after him, notwithstanding the inconveniences of pregnancy.

Sexuality then is a gift of God to man to make possible for him to procreate and, as we shall see later, to have companionship.

Both texts insist on the goodness of this physical union, blessed as it was by God himself; between them they represent a constant tradition for a half-millennium.

Hence throughout the Old Testament one does not find any negative attitude towards sexual union within the necessary bounds established either by custom or law; in setting these bounds the legislator, as we have seen, had in mind the religious and cultural environment in which they lived; custom and law provided for the sexual needs, craving as the texts puts it, of the wife, who is not simply a passive receptor; a man is bound to give her sexual rights even to a concubine (Ex 21, 10) when she desires it. Indeed it is encouraged except for certain periods for religious reasons or menstruation (Lev 15, 19-28; 18, 19; 20, 8).

This physical union is not just a passing ephemeral experience, but creates between the partners a deeper bond, expressed by the formula they 'shall be one flesh, *basbar*'. This noun did not denote simply the physical body, but the whole persons, hence one would be quite justified to say: they would become one body, one individual or person. In other terms they need each other physically, and this need is implanted in their nature by God at the very act of creation. Indeed it is quite remarkable that at this point emphasis is placed on this bond, rather than on procreation.

LOVE AS THE BASIS OF MARRIAGE

So far we have seen the *legal* bond, the *berêth*, as it was called between husband and wife, and their mutual sexual or physical attraction, leading to their becoming *one flesh*. Beyond these two kinds of bonds there is another one a deeper one, that based on *love*, the *besed*, which transcends both law and passion.

A century or so after the composition of Genesis 2, 7ff – Creation of Adam and Eve – we meet the prophet Hosea who introduced a new theme in theological thinking: the idea of the marriage between God and Israel. Time would not permit us to go into the details: we say only that he took the cue from his personal experience in marriage: he loved his wife, she left him, but he says that he is craving to receive her back if only she returns; so God also is ready to reaccept Israel who left him for other gods – sacred adultery – if she repents. The reference to sacred prostitution is quite unmistakable.

What interests us here is what kind of marriage is to be this new and regenerated one?

Hosea writes: 'There I will make a covenant, *berîth*, on behalf of Israel... I will betroth you *וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ* to myself forever *לְעוֹלָם*, betroth you in lawful wedlock *כְּצַרְקָה* with unfailing devotion. *הַסֵּד* and love *רַחֲמִים*. I will betroth you to myself to have and to hold *כְּאִמּוֹ נָה* (fidelity) and you shall know Yahweh!' Hos 2. 20-22 It is not simply a legal covenant *berîth*, but a bond of steadfast love *besed*, affection *rahamin*.

This is the ideal marriage, based not on a legal setup, neither on simple passion, but on love, *besed*, and fidelity *emunah* for ever.

This term was taken up by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the rest. It exerted a tremendous influence on the thought or theology if you like of marriage within Israel tradition.

In the post-exilic period we read an important text in Malachi, the prophet:

(The Lord) still refuses to look at the offering or receive an acceptable gift from you. You ask why. It is because the Lord has born witness against you on behalf of the wife of your youth נעורייך אשת . You have been unfaithful to her though she is your partner חכרתך and the wife by solemn covenant כריתך . Did not the one God make her, both flesh and spirit שאר רוח לו ? And what does one God required but godly children? Keep watch on your spirit, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. If a man divorces or puts away his spouse, he overwhelms her with cruelty, says the Lord. Malachi 2, 14-16.

The trend started by Hosea in this text reaches its full development. The prophet is insisting on fidelity based on the covenant, on the personality of the wife, formed of flesh and spirit; in other words the wife is a person, and she must be treated as such.

In this same view we find a series of texts in the Wisdom literature in Proverbs Ben Sirach, Tobia and other literature, especially the Song of Songs.

The place of this book in the Canon of Sacred Books has been puzzling ever since the pre-Christian era. The most commonly held view today is that this book consists of a collection of songs celebrating a purely human love, perhaps songs which were sung during marriage celebration, which then were introduced into the canon as an expression of the theme of the mystical union of God and Israel.

This means then that we have here the full development of the prophetic idea that human love symbolises divine love, and this divine love in its turn can transform and influence human love. Thus the redemption of human love is complete.

This theology of marriage went beyond the narrow concept of a purely legal covenant or a passing physical union; it rendered divorce and polygamy impossible for one believing strongly in it. In fact in later Judaism both of them became less and less common. The concept of the happy marriage with the wife as the mistress of the house became a common theme for the wisdom literature: quote Sirach 26, 13-18.

This was the ideal Jewish home on the eve of the birth of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

We have traced the development of a doctrine of marriage starting with the idea of a bond to provide man with offspring, a base contract giving property rights on the woman, to go to develop then the idea of a deeper more solid link between husband and wife, as distinct from the concubine or the slave girl, and from here to the development of the vision of a marriage based on a steadfast love, which rendered polygamy and divorce meaningless and contemptible in the eyes of the believer. It is a marriage which integrates the three aspects implied in the text of Genesis: progeny, pleasure, and companionship based on fidelity and love. These three aspects indeed are fused.

It is still away from the full Christian marriage as delineated by St. Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians; it still misses the grace of Christ, to render it possible and give it a new meaning as the living symbol of Christ's union with his Church, into one whole physical union is the expression of their *besed*, affection, between husband and wife, leading to procreation. The legal set up is the outward institutional sign of this basic human instinct; but we have a marriage based on such a prophetic vision which transcends law and custom, requiring from the partners mutual self-giving; indeed this *besed* transcends even the physical mutual attraction, and remains there even when this withers away in advanced and old age: the wife of your youth.

This is perhaps an ideal picture; it is a vision difficult to be realised. Indeed it is; the disciples said so much to our Lord, when he rejected divorce, and returned to the original concept. But for the Christian, there is another aspect, and that is, that, this human love is raised above itself through the mystical, but no less real in the union of Christ and his Church: Efes 5, 22-33

This is the Christian answer for redemption of sex and love from moral disintegration and commercial exploitation and violence.

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