

The Plot

**Grasping the overview of the Bible
is the key to its details!**

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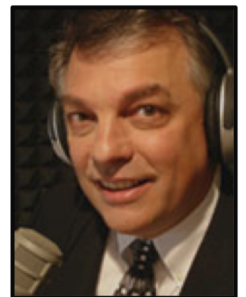
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9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21, 27-28; Mark 1:17-18; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21, 28; 15:41; Luke 5:11, 27-28; 9:23, 57, 59, 61; 18:22, 28; John 1:40, 43; 8:12; 10:4, 27; 12:26; 21:19, 22; 1 Pet. 2:21; Rev. 14:4).¹

However, Paul claims to be the "example," and the "pattern," and he orders the Body to "imitate" and "follow" him as he follows Christ. "Brethren, **join in following my example**... you have us [Paul and Timothy] for a pattern" (Phil. 3:17). "And **you became followers of us** and of the Lord..." (1 Thes. 1:6). So "...you ought to **follow us**" (2 Thes. 3:7). Paul wrote that he and Timothy made themselves "an example of how you should **follow us**" (2 Thes. 3:9). And later Paul wrote to Timothy that "**you** have carefully **followed my doctrine**" (2 Tim. 3:10) and urged him to teach "the good doctrine which you have carefully followed" (1 Tim. 4:6), "**the pattern** of sound words which **you have heard from me**" (2 Tim. 1:13). As he said, "for this reason I obtained mercy, that **in me first Jesus Christ might show [grace], as a pattern** to those who are [hereafter] going to believe" (1 Tim. 1:16). To the Corinthians he wrote "I urge you, imitate me" (1 Cor. 4:16). Standing on the personal authority that Christ gave to Paul, he even told Timothy to "continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing *from whom* you have learned them" (2 Tim. 3:14). Thus, Paul implores:

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. 1 Cor. 11:1

Paul called it "*my gospel*" (Rom. 16:25) which he said God "committed to *my trust*" (1 Tim. 1:11). For "*to me*... this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles" (Eph. 3:8) "according to *my gospel*" (2 Tim. 2:8; *cf.* 2 Cor. 4:3). He stated that "God will judge... according to *my gospel*" (Rom. 2:16) because "a dispensation of the gospel is committed *unto me*" (1 Cor. 9:17 KJV) "for His body's sake... according to the dispensation of God which is given *to me* (Col. 1:24-25 KJV) "according to the grace of God which was given *to me*, as a wise master builder *I have laid the foundation*" (1 Cor. 3:9-10).

Not Peter, James, John, nor any of the Circumcision writers use terminology anything like that of the above two paragraphs. Rather, and as expected, Peter says directly "Christ [left] us an example, that you should follow His steps" (1 Pet. 2:21) while Paul uniquely enjoins his converts to follow him and his example, to follow Christ in Paul's way.

Recall that when Peter corrupted the Gospel of Grace at Galatia by forcing the law on them (Gal. 2:11-14), Paul stood firm against even the Apostles preaching another Gospel to his converts, even if it was only their circumcision Gospel of the Kingdom that he was protecting against. Thus:

For if *he who comes* preaches... a different gospel which you have not accepted, [do not] put up with it! For I consider that I am not at all inferior to *the most eminent apostles*. 2 Cor. 11:4-5

By the immediate juxtaposition of words, Paul indicates that the ones whom he may have to challenge, the ones who may come preaching "*a different gospel*" are "*the most eminent apostles*" to whom he is not an inferior. In other words, "If Peter shows up here in Corinth, and forces upon you the notion that you are worthy to eat with him only if you get circumcised, than I will resist his imposition of Circumcision rules upon you. For God has given me a status of no less authority than the Twelve. Their circumcision Gospel teaches them not to eat with uncircumcised, unclean men. Fine. However, Peter needs to realize that God has accepted you and cleansed you through the body of Christ. Therefore, the Twelve must not treat those in the Body as uncircumcised, for 'you were circumcised without hands.' Their Gospel of the Kingdom embraces the law; my Gospel of Grace throws off the law."

The Bride and Groom

Israel is the Bride. Christ is the Bridegroom. The Scriptures do not use the exact phrase, "the bride of Christ." But the Bible frequently uses this concept to describe God's relationship with His people Israel.

¹ This paragraph ignores the eighty-six instances of some form of the word *follow* in the NKJV New Testament where the word means *proceed behind, later in time, etc.*, or where the text warns against following an evil leader. In the passages listed, *follow* essentially means *to become a disciple of or to obey*.

Believers most commonly hear that the Body of Christ is the Bride. However, Israel is the Bride, and the Body of Christ is more correctly identified with the Groom, if anything, the Body is not the Bride, but the body of the Groom.

Christians blur these roles primarily because they overlook the distinction between Israel and the Body. God arranged a marriage and went through a courtship with Israel. Then God and Israel entered into a marriage contract (i.e., covenant). God's wife committed adultery so He began a formal period of separation during which she did not repent. Eventually, He divorced her. Ultimately, however, He promises to take her back. So, Israel now looks forward to a future remarriage. For God sees her again as His bride-to-be.

The following wedding story occurs in the Bible in chronological order. (Some of the later passages refer back to previous events.)

God's relationship with Israel began when He arranged to move her out of her father's house (Gen. 12:1-2). After the courtship had begun, God waited more than four hundred years while Israel grew up (Ezek. 16:7; Gen. 15:13). When she was ready (Ezek. 16:8; Song 2:7) the LORD allured her "into the wilderness" (Hos. 2:14-15) and "took [Israel] by the hand" (Jer. 31:32; Ex. 32:11). As God remembers it, He saw "the love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness" (Jer. 2:2). Then God formally proposed (Ex. 19:4-5), and assembled the wedding party (Ex. 24:1). Israel then entered into her marriage covenant with God (Ex. 24:6-8; Ezek. 16:8 w/ Ruth 3:9), not by saying "I do" but *we do* (Ex. 24:3) "'and you became Mine,' says the Lord GOD" (Ezek. 16:8). The bride and the Groom stood at the altar and *faced each other* (Deut. 5:4) as Moses officiated (Ex. 24:6-8).² The wedding party then enjoyed a dinner while the LORD attended dressed in finery (Ex. 24:9-11). As families often name the firstborn son after the father, so God had requested special dedication of the firstborn sons (Ex. 22:29) of His marriage to Israel. The Husband warned His new wife against adultery (Deut. 5:5-7 [v. 6 w/ Gal. 4:2], 18) declaring Himself the "jealous" type (Deut. 6:14-15). The celebrations had barely commenced when Israel began to lust after others (Ex. 32:4). At the end of a rocky honeymoon, on their 40th anniversary, Moses read to Israel the *marriage contract*—the *entire book of Deuteronomy*—which retells the principle events and agreements of the preparations and ceremony including the wife's promise to love, honor and obey her Husband (Deut. 5:27; 11:13; 30:20). Then the LORD brought her to the land of His "own dwelling" (Ex. 15:17; 23:20; Deut. 4:37-38) and carried Israel over the threshold to her new home, over the Jordan river (Josh. 3:11-17) to the richly furnished houses that He had promised her (Deut. 6:10-11).

The consummation of the marriage resulted not in joy but in tragedy:

"Moreover you took your sons and your daughters, whom you bore to Me, and these you sacrificed..." Ezek. 16:20

As His wife, Israel's unfaithfulness hurt God deeply:

"Yet you were not like a harlot, because you scorned payment. **You are an adulterous wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband.**" Ezek. 16:31-32

God eventually divorced His wife, but still He longed for her:

"They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again?' Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me," says the LORD. Jer. 3:1

More than a century before this statement of divorce, Isaiah had presented an interesting question. Where was God's certificate of divorce for Israel? Through Moses, God instructed that to divorce an unfaithful wife, the husband must provide a certificate of divorce³ (Deut. 24:1, 3; [Jer. 3:8]; Mat. 5:31; 19:7-8; Mark 10:4-5). As Isaiah recorded the question:

2 And Moses called all Israel, and said to them... "The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb... *The LORD talked with you face to face...* **I stood between the LORD and you** at that time..." Deut. 5:2-5

3 For fascinating biblical material on this issue, see the author's video *The Bible, Divorce and Remarriage* available at KGOV.com.

Thus says the LORD: "**Where is the certificate of your mother's divorce, whom I have put away?** ... and for your transgressions your mother has been put away." Isa. 50:1

Through Jeremiah, God acknowledges the existence of such a certificate:

"...for all the causes for which backsliding *Israel* had committed adultery, **I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce...**" Jer. 3:8

The *certificate of divorce* is Jeremiah's other book, Lamentations. The third division of the Hebrew Scriptures, called *The Writings*, contains eleven books. Jews traditionally use the five middle books of *The Writings* for festival readings. Those five books fill a single scroll, called the *Meghilloth*. Lamentations lies as the central book within *The Writings*, and the central book within the *Meghilloth*. These particular five books form the core of the wisdom books. The *Meghilloth* provides an overview, the plot, of the whole story of God's covenant relationship with Israel. In order, these books are the Song of Solomon about the romance of betrothal; the marriage of Ruth to the kinsman Redeemer; the Lamentations of the destruction of unfaithfulness; all the vanity of Ecclesiastes; and Esther, about the orphan girl in exile who becomes queen and of the salvation of her people. So, the Judge eventually gave Israel her divorce decree by sending her the book of *Lamentations*.

Lamentations imparts its message as the student reads it from the perspective of the jealous Husband who spurns his unfaithful wife. In the first verse He pictures Israel "like a widow." She is not a widow, since her LORD had not died, but she is "like a widow" because He has left her. Every chapter flows with the inconsolable tears of a wife who realizes she destroyed her marriage with her own hands. The verses describe a vacated home, bereft of love and celebration due to a cheating wife who did not consider the consequences. The Husband writes down the sum total of his wife's adulteries and hangs them around her neck. The scorned woman calls for her lovers but even they have left her. Outside there is mourning, but at home things are even worse, like death, because the loving Husband no longer remembers the place where He once rested His feet. Even her own mother cannot soothe the wife's pain. The children suffer and the economic cost of divorce sets in as she loses her prosperity, home, and inheritance. She brought the agony upon herself, yet it also came from the LORD who had turned His hand against her and refused to listen to her prayers. Cast aside, the wife realizes that even grieving over death does not reach the anguish of rejection. The lament ends with these words:

Why do You forget us forever, and forsake us for so long a time? Turn us back to You, O LORD, and we will be restored; renew our days as of old, unless you have utterly rejected us, and are very angry with us! Lam. 5:20-22

In passing, note that *The Writings* abounds in poetry. Hebrew poets tend toward various kinds of parallelisms, or the coupling of ideas. One type, inverted parallelism, links the first with the last idea, the second with the penultimate, the third with the antepenult, and so on with crescendo until reaching the center (e.g. Ps. 8). *The Writings* section itself is a great inverted parallelism of eleven books, matching the first with the last, and inward until Job and Daniel stand like bookends surrounding the *Meghilloth* scroll at the center. The *Meghilloth* is itself inverted toward its own middle. Reinforcing the parallelism, for example, God selected the wisdom of Solomon to author both Song and Ecclesiastes, to chronicle the ecstasy of passion and then the despair of dissolution. At the center of it all lies the book of Lamentations, the truest portrayal of God's relationship with Israel, the people of the circumcision who were themselves cut off. Like a keystone bearing the burden of the whole arch, Lamentations is also an inverted parallelism with its own five chapters pointing inward toward the center. The poem repeatedly forms an acrostic, spelling out the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet with the first letters of its verses. Thus the first, second, fourth, and fifth chapters each have twenty-two verses, as the Hebrew language has twenty-two letters. Chapter three, the central element which supports the whole, has sixty-six verses, with three lines for each symbol of the alphabet. The central set of twenty-two verses within chapter three, the headstone on which all *The Writings* rests, declares "Great is *Your* faithfulness," as the belated recognition of the

unfaithful wife. Lamentations continues until the last chapter where, as Bullinger's *Companion Bible* states, "the acrostic arrangement gives way before the outburst of emotion."

So Lamentations is Israel's certificate of divorce, which God gave to Israel, as He says:

"...because I was crushed by their adulterous heart which has departed from Me, and by their eyes which play the harlot..." Ezek. 6:9

"Bring charges against your mother, bring charges; for she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband [i.e. any longer]!" Hos. 2:2

God hopes Israel will someday respond to the consequences:

"She will chase her lovers, but not overtake them... Then she will say, '**I will go and return to my first husband**, for then it was better for me than now.'" Hos. 2:7

"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, **My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them**," says the Lord. Jer. 31:31-32

In a dramatic development, God then prophesied a future restoration of His marriage to Israel:

"For **your Maker is your husband**... For the LORD has called you **like a woman forsaken** and grieved in spirit, **like a youthful wife when you were refused**," says your God. "**For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you.** With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; but with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer. Isa. 54:5-8

For He will call Israel His "bride" once again:

You shall no longer be termed forsaken, nor shall your land any more be termed desolate... for the LORD delights in you, and **your land shall be married**. For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you; and **as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you**. Isa. 62:4-5

The Lord will woo her to Himself in the latter days:

"Therefore, behold, **I will allure her**, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. ...**as in the days of her youth**, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. And it shall be, **in that day**," says the LORD, "That **you will call Me 'My Husband'**, and no longer call Me 'My Master'... **In that day I will** make a covenant for them... I will **betroth you to Me forever**; yes, I will betroth you to Me... in lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD... Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, and I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God!'" Then the LORD said to me [Hosea], "Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the LORD for the children of Israel..." Afterward **the children of Israel shall return** and seek the LORD their God... They shall fear the LORD and His goodness **in the latter days**. Hos. 2:14-16, 18-20, 23; 3:1, 5

Humanly speaking, God will not forget the wife of His youth (Prov. 5:18; [Song 8:6-7; Mal. 2:14-15]). Not surprisingly, then, Jesus spoke to Israel of their coming marriage:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son..." Mat. 22:2 (See also Mat. 25:10; [Luke 14:8; John 2:1-11])

The "marriage of the Lamb... and His wife" (Rev. 19:7) unites Christ with Israel, that is, with those of the works of the law. For He dresses His bride in a wedding gown of white linen made of "*the righteous*

acts [not of Christ, but] of the saints" (Rev. 19:8). The "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9) has not yet occurred, but remains as a future event, described as it is, near the end of the book of Revelation.

Today, the Body identifies itself as the bride. Rachel thought she was the bride all along, possibly even during the wedding "feast" (Gen. 29:22) and right up till moments prior to the consummation "in the evening" (Gen. 29:23). With concern for Leah, the first, Laban said that "It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn" (Gen. 29:26). Neither will God forget Israel, His firstborn people (Rom. 11:23-29; [1:16; 1 Tim. 1:16]), so to speak.

As members, believers today makeup the *Body* of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12-13, 20; Eph. 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:4; 5:30; Col. 1:24; 3:15), not the *Bride* of Christ [John 3:29]. Unless a particular analogy requires otherwise (Rom. 7:1-4; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27), God will portray Israel as feminine (Isa. 54:6; Jer. 3:1, 20; Ezek. 16:7; Song; Hos. 1:2; 2:2) and the Body of Christ as masculine. God speaks of "*His* body" (Eph. 1:23; 5:30; Col. 1:24), "a perfect *man*" (Eph. 4:13, not *anqrwpoō*, a human being, but *andra*, a *male* adult, frequently, a husband). For "*He* is the head of the body" (Col. 1:18) which is "in *Him*" (Col. 1:19) and has everything under "*His* feet" (Eph. 1:22). The Gentiles inherit the Body which is "*His*" (Eph. 3:6) and "grow up in all things into *Him*" (Eph. 4:15) "conformed to *His* glorious body" (Phil. 3:21). Jesus, the Son (not daughter) of God (Eph. 4:13; etc.) has a male Body and a female bride.

Paul's marriage analogies do not imply that Christ is a polygamist with two wives, Israel and the Body, or that He has a schizophrenic wife. Rather, he speaks in a human way, making an analogy that (like all analogies) does not hold up in every respect:

Oh, that you would bear with me in *a little folly*... *For I have betrothed you to one husband*, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. 2 Cor. 11:1-2

So to speak, that is. "Bear with me." To paraphrase Paul, "Please understand the point. Allow me to overstate the case so you get my drift."

Rather than speaking of an actual betrothal, Paul simply uses the marriage analogy to communicate the idea of being dead to the law and alive to God. For just as a woman is bound by the law to her husband until he dies (Rom. 7:2), "you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another; to Him" (Rom. 7:4), right now! Paul speaks not of a coming feast but of a present reality; not even of a symbolic betrothal but of a substantive oneness, not of marriage but analogous to marriage.

Paul makes the same analogy in Ephesians (Eph. 5:22-33). There he uses such strong words that, not surprisingly, many students misunderstand and think he supplants Israel as the Bride. However, analogies and figures break down (while plain indicative statements of truth, minus such devices, hold up). Paul analogizes Christ and the Body saying, "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). Paul did not mean that Christ left His Father *and* mother. And he did not mean that the Body had married Christ. While all analogies do break down, it is still worth noticing that in this analogy, Christ *already* heads the Body just as "the husband is head of the wife" (Eph. 5:23). However, the marriage feast of the Lamb remains a future event (Rev. 19:7-9). So Christians cannot have it both ways, already married yet still awaiting a future marriage feast. In this context Paul teaches proper family relationships for wives, husbands and children (Eph. 5:22-6:4) and for masters and slaves (Eph. 6:5-9). For each relationship, he brings the Lord into the lesson to motivate each believer regardless of his station in life.

But what does Paul mean when he adds, "This is a *great mystery*, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church" (Eph. 5:32)? He does not mean God's betrothal, for that was not a secret mystery but a broadly revealed truth. Consider the statement he refers to: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The primary meaning of this statement is the marriage union of two people, *spiritually*. However, a secondary meaning remains hidden. The man joins to his wife and the two *physically* become one flesh *in their offspring*. Abraham and Sarah joined together and became one flesh, truly and irrevocably and physically, in Isaac. "And the Word became flesh" (John 1:14) too, not by a mystery but by a *great* mystery! The Father God, through the Holy Spirit,

and the mother Israel, through Mary, produced one Flesh, and "we are members... *of His flesh*, and of His bones" (Eph. 5:30). The Gentiles "He has reconciled in the body of His flesh" (Col. 1:21-22). God and a woman (Rev. 12:1-2), who was Israel, produced a child (Rev. 12:5; Isa. 7:14; Gen. 3:15; Num. 24:17; 2 Sam. 7:12-14; Micah 5:2; Acts 2:29-30; [Mat. 2:6; Heb. 10:5]), called the Son of God. God has always existed, but Christ's *body*, His flesh, came into existence when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary (Luke 1:35) and the virgin conceived (Isa. 7:14). Because Christ has a body, today He can incorporate believers into that Body. Thus, by a *great* mystery, believers in the Body of Christ have their exalted position because God came to Israel and, through her, produced a body for His Son.

With Israel as the Bride and the Body of Christ as the body of the Bridegroom, all believers can expect an eternal relationship of great joy, not only with God, but with myriads.

Two New Testament Camps

The New Testament describes two different groups of God's people, the *House of Israel* (Mat. 10:6, etc.) which is of the law, and the *Household of Faith* (Gal. 6:10) which is the Body. God associates Israel with the number twelve and the Body with the number one.

Israel has, for example:

- twelve patriarchs Acts 7:8
- twelve tribes Gen. 49:28
- twelve pillars Ex. 24:4
- twelve stones Ex. 28:21; Josh. 4:3; 1 Ki. 18:31
- twelve offerings Num. 7:87; Ezra 6:17
- twelve oxen 1 Ki. 7:25; Jer. 52:20
- twelve apostles Mat. 10:2
- twelve thrones Mat. 19:28
- twelve thousand of each tribe Rev. 7:4
- twelve stars Rev. 12:1
- twelve gates Rev. 21:12
- twelve foundations Rev. 21:14

Whereas, concerning the Body of Christ:

- we have many members in one body Rom. 12:4
- we, being many, are one body Rom. 12:5
- we, though many are one body 1 Cor. 10:17
- all [are] members of that one body 1 Cor. 12:12b
- being many, [we] are one body 1 Cor. 12:12c
- by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body 1 Cor. 12:13
- there are many members, yet *one* body 1 Cor. 12:20
- that He might reconcile them both to God in one body Eph. 2:16
- There is *one* body Eph. 4:4
- you were called in one body Col. 3:15

Coincidentally, and only to illustrate this contrast, exactly 120 *verses* of the New King James contain the phrase "*the* house of Israel." Meanwhile the phrase "the household of faith" used by Paul refers to the Body and occurs only *once* in the entire Bible (Gal. 6:10). And while 120 *verses* (12 x 10) contain the phrase "the house of Israel," exactly ten verses (1 x 10) contain the phrase "one body" referring to the Body of Christ.

Consider therefore the many things that differ between Israel and the Body: