

The Bride of Christ

Introduction

Most churches in Christendom teach the Church is the “bride of Christ.” But the phrase “bride of Christ” does not occur in the Bible. Furthermore, the imagery of the Church as bride is thin at best. The goal of this study is to examine whether the teaching that the Church, the body of Christ, is the bride of Christ has Biblical merit.

The Bride in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the idea of Israel as the “wife” of God is developed. Though Israel was “married” to God she proved an unfaithful spouse. The nation’s unfaithfulness was expressed as spiritual adultery: it deserted Him for false gods, e.g., Baal, Asherah, Molech, Dagon, etc. Despite these failures, God declared the nation would return to Him, that they would become what He had purposed for them, and that He would fulfill His covenant promises to them. According to God’s promise, the entire nation would become priests (Exodus 19.6) and a faithful wife. With this in mind, Isaiah wrote:

⁴ “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. ⁵ “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. ⁶ “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. ⁷ “For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you. ⁸ “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 (Isaiah 54.4-8).

¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning. ² The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will designate. ³ You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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 (Isaiah 62.1-5).

Jeremiah wrote:

"Return, faithless people," declares the LORD, "for I am your husband. I will choose you—one from a town and two from a clan—and bring you to Zion (Jeremiah 3.14).

³¹ "Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³ "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people (Jeremiah

31.31-33).

God used the prophet Hosea's personal life as an object lesson to instruct idolatrous Israel. To present His case, God told Hosea to marry an idolatrous woman,¹ to represent Israel's faithlessness in serving other gods. Hosea had three children by his wife, Gomer. Their names depicted God's judgment of the nation. The first child, a son, was named [Jezreel](#) (God scatters). God judged (scattered) the northern kingdom with the Assyrian invasion (722 B.C.). The second child was a daughter named [Lo-ruhama](#) (not pitied) and the third child, a son, was named [Lo-ammi](#) (not my people). But God's disfavor would be temporary. He promised that the nation would repent of its unfaithfulness and return to Him. Hosea wrote:

¹⁴ "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her. ¹⁵ "Then I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor as a door of hope. And she will sing there as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ "It will come about in that day," declares the LORD, "That you will call Me Ishi and will no longer call Me Baali. ¹⁷ "For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, so that they will be mentioned by their names no more. ¹⁸ "In that day I will also make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land, and will make them lie down in safety. ¹⁹ "I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, ²⁰ And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD (Hosea 2.14-20).

In this tender passage, God is seen as a courting lover. He

“allures” the object of His love and speaks kindly to her. The passage speaks of a refreshed relationship in which His wife (Israel) will call Him [אֱלֹהֵינוּ](#) “my husband,” “my man” (Ishi) instead of [אֱלֹהֵינוּ](#) “my Lord.” Baal ([בַּעַל](#)) was one of the false gods Israel discovered when they came into the land of Canaan (Numbers 22.41; Judges 2.13). In the prophecy of this restored relationship, in which God will put His Spirit into the nation (Jeremiah 31.31-40), the animal kingdom will also be at peace (Isaiah 11.6-9) and war will be no more (Isaiah 2.1-4). This renewed betrothal will be eternal and Israel will know the Lord—the One True God.²

The Bride in Revelation

The book of Revelation reads like an Old Testament book. And for good reason. Most of its symbols and imagery are found in the prophets. To a discerning reader, it should be clear that Jesus’ messages to the assemblies ([ἐκκλησία](#)) in Revelation 2-3 were not Christian, i.e., Pauline churches. The language the Lord used towards them has no correspondence to the language or the concepts Paul had received and communicated to Christian churches. John wrote to these seven Jewish assemblies to encourage them in the tribulation they were experiencing (cf. Revelation 1.9). Of the seven cities Jesus mentioned, only three are found elsewhere in the Bible: Ephesus (Acts 18.19, 21, 24, 19.1, 17, 26, 35, 20.16, 17; 1 Corinthians 15.32, 16.8, Ephesians 1.1, 1 Timothy 1.3; 2 Timothy 1.18, 4.12), Thyatira (Acts 16.14), and Laodicea (Colossians 2.1, 4.13, 15-16; 1 Timothy 6.21). We have no information about Smyrna, Pergamon, Sardis, or Philadelphia. The events of Revelation remain future. Those who have attempted to make church history correspond with the messages to these churches (historicists—see below example) or worse, have tried to fit the events into a pre-70 A.D. timeframe (preterists), have replaced sound exegesis with fantasy.

The character of these assemblies is Jewish. No Church, i.e., body of Christ, doctrine is present in them. The Lord's message to them is wholly different from the language He gave to Paul for the body of Christ. No hint of the gospel or the doctrines of grace may be found in Jesus' words to these assemblies. Jesus' refrain is "he who has an ear, let him hear" and His command is to persevere and endure. None of this is present in Paul. The warnings Jesus gave the assemblies echo His warnings to the Twelve on the Mount of Olives. In that address, He warned them not to be deceived and to endure to the end (Matthew 24.4, 11, 24, 13). The great temptation that will confront Israel, as well as the world, during the period of time foretold by Revelation, will be to accept a false Messiah. This will involve the worship of Satan, the beast (Satan's man, the Antichrist), the Antichrist's image, and the taking of his mark (Revelation 13.4, 8, 15, 16-17). Jesus' refrain to the seven assemblies is repeated in Revelation 13.9. In Revelation 14.9-11, God's angel warned of the consequences of submitting to the temptation. Revelation 14.12 describes the "patience," "perseverance," or "endurance" ([ὑπομονή](#)) Jesus described in the Jewish assemblies in Revelation 2.3, 19, 3.10. During this period of time salvation is possible only through endurance (Matthew 24.13). Jesus' words about salvation during this period are as straightforward as words can be: only by enduring to the end, i.e., the end of one's life (martyrdom) or until He returns is salvation possible.

Since the book is primarily about Israel and reads like the Old Testament, one conclusion remains: that is what it is. The bride of Revelation 19 is Israel, not the Church, the body of Christ, since the Church is nowhere in the book. John wrote:

⁷ 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." ⁸ 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. ⁹ then he *said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb'" (Revelation 19.7-9).*

In the marriage of the Lamb, we read that the bride has made herself ready. Does this sound like the Church, the body of Christ? Paul declared members of the body of Christ have been made complete in Christ (ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, Colossians 2.10). The Church needs no "preparation." We are complete in Him! No, the bride here is Israel and the "marriage of the Lamb" is the reconciliation of Israel with God which the prophets foretold.

In Revelation 21, John described a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21.1) to replace the old heaven and earth which had departed ([ἀπέρχομαι](#)). Along with the new heaven and earth is the new Jerusalem. It comes down from heaven onto the new earth (Revelation 21.2). John described the city as a bride adorned for her husband. In Revelation 21.9, one of the seven angels of the seven bowls showed John the bride, called the wife of the Lamb. This was the new Jerusalem. Again, everything is Jewish. The city has twelve gates with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel written on them (Revelation 21.12). The twelve foundation stones have the names of the twelve apostles (Revelation 21.14; cf. Matthew 19.28). Nothing of the Church is here.

Israel had both an earthly and a heavenly calling. They were called out from among the nations of the earth and given earthly promises, e.g., a kingdom and preeminence among the nations (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13). But they had a heavenly calling also, described in Hebrews 3.1 that began with Abraham, cf. Hebrews 11.8-10. Abraham anticipated ([ἐκδέχομαι](#)) a heavenly city. How much he knew of it is unknown. But he looked for a heavenly city. The new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 was that city.

The first two callings pertain to Israel. The third calling is for the Church, the body of Christ (Ephesians 1.18; 2 Timothy 1.9). God's promises to the Church are wholly heavenly, not earthly (Ephesians 1.3, 2.6; Philippians 3.20).

Paul and the Bride of Christ?

Paul taught that the Church was the body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22-23; Colossians 1.18, 24) and that believers become members of His body through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13). This revelation was one of the "secrets" ([μυστήριον](#)) the glorified Lord revealed to Paul alone. Paul was the only writer of Scripture who taught that the Church was the body of Christ. He declared that before him this truth was not known (Ephesians 3.3-7).

We have established that the Scriptures teach that the Church is the body of Christ. How is it most of Christendom teaches the Church is the bride of Christ? Two passages have been used to make this argument. They are the following:

2 Corinthians 11.2

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.

Read out of context, this passage may appear to support the idea that the Church is the bride of Christ. But the verses that follow correct such wandering. Paul continued,

³ But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted,

you bear this beautifully. ⁵ For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. ⁶ But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things (2 Corinthians 11.3-6).

Paul's point was to encourage the Corinthians to remain faithful to Christ and his gospel (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Paul constantly had to defend his ministry—from both unbelievers *and believers*. From his words in this passage, he recognized he was not the most polished speaker. But in terms of knowledge, he was far ahead of anyone else: he was God's apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11.13). The risen Lord had commissioned him and revealed to him secrets no one else knew.³ Paul's choice of words to the Corinthians, "present you as a pure virgin" was to illustrate his desire for holy living for these believers, not to teach that the Church is the bride of Christ—any more than Paul taught that he was their mother (Galatians 4.19) or their father (1 Corinthians 4.15).

Ephesians 5.22-33

²² Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. ²⁴ But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶ so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless. ²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own

bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; ²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of His body. ³¹ FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. ³² This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. ³³ Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must see to it that she respects her husband.

In the passage above, Paul argued that as a husband is the head of a wife, Christ is the head of the Church. This fits with Paul's teaching that the Church is the body of Christ with Christ Himself as the Head (Ephesians 1.22; Colossians 1.18). Paul noted that husbands should love their wives as their own bodies (v. 28) because no one ever hated his own flesh (v.29). One nourishes his body and cherishes it (v.29). It is this nourishing and care of a husband for his own body that Paul used to make the analogy regarding Christ's care for His Church, i.e., His body (v. 29-30). Paul quoted Genesis 2.24, not to make a point about the husband/wife relationship or that the Church is the bride of Christ but to emphasize the *unity* and *care* for the body. Paul declared this was a great "secret" ([μυστήριον](#)) but that he spoke with reference to Christ and His Church (v. 32).

Since the Church is the body of Christ it means that if Christ is the bridegroom we are part of His groomsmanship. Thus, we are of the bridegroom, not the bride!

Conclusion

Wife and bride are titles that belong to Israel, not the Church. Our title is "the body of Christ." As the body, we are of the bridegroom, not the bride. If you cannot tell the

bridegroom from the bride at a marriage it is going to be a confusing wedding. But God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14.33). He wishes believers to understand who they are, where they fit in His plan, and what promises belong to them. When we do, we can rejoice in the grace God has given to us and serve and honor Him effectively.

¹ Hosea's wife זְנוּיָהוּ (Hosea 1.2) was most likely an idolater, not a physical prostitute. This is what seems to be indicated in Hosea 2.8, 13, 3.1, 4.12-19, etc. God used Hosea's personal life to address the spiritual adultery of the nation, their unfaithfulness to God as Israel's husband.

² See the author's study, [The One True God](#).

³ See the author's study, [Paul's "Mystery"](#).

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