

AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF GENESIS 2:18-25
AND ITS APPLICATION TO THE YORUBA
MARRIAGE AND CUSTOM

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Introduction

The Bible is overwhelmingly positive in its treatment of marriage and sexuality. In the creation account, especially that of man and woman, much emphasis is placed on the goodness of love and sex within the context of marriage. Proverbs 5:18-19 says:

*May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
A loving doe, a graceful deer
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.*

But in spite of the Biblical injunction on marriage and sexual union, many marriages today, for reasons best known to couples, last only for a few months or years and then collapse.¹ The intriguing question is why do we have so many cases of incompatibility among couples in our contemporary Nigerian society? Therefore, the focus of this paper is to examine Biblical injunction on marriage and sexual union through an exegetical study of Genesis 2:18-25. In other words, attempt will be made to understand God's original intention for marriage and sexual union.

The historical-exegetical method is adopted in the paper. The work is historical in the sense that relevant books, commentaries and articles on the subject are examined. It is exegetical in that Genesis 2:18-25 is studied with the use of Hebrew lexicon and relevant theological books. All Biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible unless otherwise stated.

Meaning and Importance of Marriage

The Hebrew word for marriage is עֲוֹנָה which is a feminine noun and it means "to dwell together as husband and wife; sexual cohabitation; and duty of marriage"² Its Greek equivalent is γάμος which means "marriage or wedding."³ Virtually every culture in the world has its customs on marriage which are highly respected by every member of the community. Writing on the importance of marriage to the Jews, William Barclay notes:

No nation has ever had a higher view of marriage than the Jews. Marriage was a sacred duty. To remain unmarried after the age of twenty, except in order to concentrate upon the study of the Law, was to break a positive commandment to be fruitful and multiply.⁴

Marriage is a significant institution because it arises out of the divine programme for humanity. It was planned by God from the time of creation to meet the human need for companionship, love, mutual encouragement, practical help and sexual satisfaction.⁵ It was the first institution in human society which was established by God before all

other human institutions. Writing on marriage as a covenant between the man and the woman, Henri Blocher notes:

Marriage is the covenant sanctioned by the authority in charge of social order, by which a man and a woman commit themselves unreservedly to each other to live a common life and to join in sexual union.⁶

An Exegesis of Genesis 2:18-25

Genesis 2:18-25, the creation of the woman, is located within Genesis 1-11, the so-called 'primeval history' or the 'pre-patriarchal history'.⁷ The key stories found in this section include: the creation, fall of man, Cain and Abel, sons of God, flood and Babel.⁸ The documentary hypothesis places Genesis 2:18-25 in the Yahwistic (J) source as expressions characteristic of this document are found in Genesis 2:14; 2:23 etc⁹.

Genesis 2:18 begins with God's statement "It is not good that the man be alone". Obviously, the only thing that is not good in the creation account is the loneliness of man. Based on this fact, the LORD determined to make a helper suitable for him. The Hebrew word עֲזָרָה means help or succour.¹⁰ The word is at times used in the context of divine assistance cf. Isa. 30:5; Ezek. 12:14 and Hos. 13:9. G. J. Wenham notes that "to help someone does not imply that the helper is stronger than the helped; simply that the latter's strength is inadequate by itself" Jos. 1:14, 10:4, 6; 1 Chr. 12:17, 19, 21, 22.¹¹ Also, the Hebrew word כַּנְגֵדוֹ is a compound preposition which means 'like opposite of him', 'his counterpart' or 'the other half of

him'. The word is found only here (Genesis 2:18) in the Old Testament.¹² This then means that the help looked for is not just assistance in his daily or in the procreation of children... but mutual support and companionship for each other.¹³ After all, Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 says:

*Two are better than one
Because they have a good return for their work;
If one falls down, His friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
Two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

Commenting on the importance of 'help' coming to the man from the woman, H. C. Leupold is of the opinion that "if a man is to achieve his objectives in life, he needs the help of his mate in every way, from the propagating of his kind down through the scale of his varied activities"¹⁴ The creation of woman became necessary because man was alone in the garden even though he was the head of the creation, the one who gave names to all living creatures. Therefore, God caused a deep stir to fall upon the man as an initial step in the creation of woman. The Hebrew word תַּרְדֵּמָה is a feminine noun which means 'deep sleep'.¹⁵ It connotes extraordinary sleep or supernatural sleep. It is often used of divinely induced sleep as in 1 Sam 26:12 where the LORD caused Saul and his men to sleep (cf. Isaiah 29:10). The word also speaks of an extraordinary sleep for the

occasion of divine revelation as in the cases of Abraham and Job in Gen. 15:12 and Job 4:13 respectively. Speaking of this sleep, G. Aalder notes:

The 'deep sleep' must be considered as something akin to an anaesthesia which the medical profession can induce by various means. In fact, the operation that God performed on the man is not wholly unlike medical surgery.¹⁶

It was while the man was having this 'deep sleep' that God took away one of his ribs and filled the empty space with flesh. The Hebrew word for rib is צֶלֶעַ which generally means 'side'. The word is used of the 'side' of the ark (Exod. 25:12, 14); the 'side' of the tabernacle (Exod. 26:20); the 'side' of a room (1 Kgs. 6:5)¹⁷. But in this context, the word is used in reference to the rib taken from the side of the man. Writing on the importance of the creation of the woman, Matthew Henry notes:

That the woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.¹⁸

After God had created the woman, He brought her to the man, who had awakened from his deep sleep. The man immediately recognized the woman as his life companion and the complete fulfilment of the longing waited for. He recognized that she had been taken out of his body as his perfect helpmeet. In ecstasy he bursts into poetry as recorded in Genesis 2:23:

*This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called woman,
for she was taken out of man.¹⁹*

The removal of the rib and its conversion into a woman illustrates the same truth of the woman coming out of the man (1 Cor. 11:8, 12). Generally, feminine nouns in Hebrew are formed from the masculine nouns. An example is this passage where the Hebrew word אִשָּׁה (woman) is from אִישׁ (man). Thus the woman receives her name from the man, that is, her generic name *Issah* (2:23) and her personal name Eve (3:20).²⁰

There are two words in Genesis 2:24 that explain the biblical concept of marriage. The first word is עָזַב which is the *Qal* Imperfect third person masculine singular of the verb עָזַב which means to leave, forsake or loose.²¹ The word is used in Genesis 44:22 in the context of Benjamin whom his brothers said could not leave their father and that "if he leaves him, his father will die." The same word is used in 2 Kings 2:2, 4, 6 where Elisha said to Elijah "As surely as the LORD lives and you live, I will not leave you." In this context, that is, in Genesis 2:24, the word is used for a man who forsake his parents. The same concept is understood in I Samuel 30:13 where David asked an Egyptian slave "To whom do you belong and where do you come from?" And the slave said "My master abandoned me when I became ill three days ago." The word is at times used in the context of parents forsaking their children cf. Joshua 22:3; Jer. 49:11 and Psalm 27:10. The word is even used of a wife forsaking her husband (Prov. 2:17).

Commenting on this concept, G. J. Wenham notes:

The traditional translation 'leaves' suggests that the man moves from his parents and set up home elsewhere, whereas in fact Israelite marriage was usually patrilocal, that is, the man continued to live near in or near his parents' home. It was the wife who left home to join her husband.²²

The second important word in Genesis 2:24 is the verb *דָּבַק* which means "to cling, cleave, to keep close."²³ Literally, the word is used to mean cling or cleave to as the bone is to the skin (Job 19:20); hand to sword (2 Sam. 23:10); tongue to the roof of the mouth in thirst (Job 29:10; Psalm 137:6). Figuratively, the word speaks of loyalty or affection between a man and his wife (Gen 2:24). The word is used in Gen 34:3 where the Shechem's love of Dinah is described as "his heart was drawn to Dinah." The word is also used in Ruth 1:14 where Ruth clung to her (Naomi)." Furthermore, the word occurs in 1 Kings 11:2 where Solomon held fast to many foreign women. The word suggests "both passion and permanence which should characterize marriage."²⁴

The use of the terms 'forsake' and 'cleave' in Genesis 2:24 suggests that marriage is viewed in the Old Testament as a covenant between the man and the woman.²⁵ The husband and wife's becoming one flesh has several implications which include "sexual union that follows marriage; children conceived in marriage; spiritual and emotional relationship; and most importantly the kinship relationship between the man and the woman."²⁶ In other words, they become related to each other as brothers and sisters are.

Jesus Christ made use of Genesis 2:24 to establish the fact that marriage is an ordinance of God while He was responding to the question raised by some Pharisees as to whether it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife (Matt. 19:1-9). Obviously, the question was asked in the light of the controversy on marriage and divorce which was the main issue in the Jewish society. Jesus, in response to their question, and without getting involved in the Hillel-Shammal controversy, reminded the people of God's original purpose in establishing the marriage bond.²⁷ Jesus Christ made reference to Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 to affirm that in marriage, God joins male and female together in an inseparable bond. Jesus was of the opinion that Adam and Eve were created for each other and for no one else. This means that marriage is for life and that divorce is not allowed.

Genesis 2:25 says "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." The word *ערומים* is the plural form of *ערום* which is an adjective of the verb *עָרַר* which means "be naked".²⁸ The word *עָרַר* occurs first in Gen. 2:25 and in other passages in the Old Testament. Two of such passages include 1 Sam. 19:24, where Saul was stripped off his robes as he prophesied in the presence of Samuel; and in Job 22:6 Eliphaz reprimanded Job stripping men of their clothing and leaving them naked. G. J. Wenham suggests that the phrase "they felt no shame" should be translated "they were unabashed" or "they were not disconcerted" on the ground that the Hebrew word *בוש* "to be ashamed" does not carry the overtones of personal guilt that English 'shame' include.²⁹ That is, Hebrew can

speak of 'shame' triggered by circumstances completely extrinsic to the speaker (Judges 3:25; 2 Kgs 2:17). Thus the point of focus is that the man and the woman did not feel a sense of shame of their nakedness. They were like young children unashamed at their nakedness. None of them had fear of exploitation.

The Place of Sexual Union in Marriage

God created the man and the woman for the purpose of sexual reproduction (Gen. 1:27-28). Therefore, sex, within marriage is not a sin. Rather, it is good (Gen 1:31) and holy (Heb. 13:4). Ed & Wheat notes:

The sex relationship in marriage receives such emphasis in the scriptures that we begin to see it was meant not only to be a wonderful, continuing experience for the husband and wife, but it also was intended to show us something even more wonderful about God and His relationship with us.³⁰

They state further while counselling unhappy couples with wrong attitudes and faulty approaches to sex:

You have God's permission to enjoy sex within your marriage. He invented sex; he thought it up to begin with. You can learn to enjoy it, and, husbands, you can develop a thrilling, happy marriage with 'the wife of your youth'. If your marriage has been a civil-war battlefield or a dreary wasteland, instead of a lover's trysting place, all that can change. You see, God has a perfect plan for marriage, which we may choose to step into at any time, and the mistakes of the past can be dealt with and left behind.³¹

Sex, within marriage serves as a primary means of expressing not only our fundamental sexuality but also the mutual commitment of the marriage partners.³² Stanley A. Ellisen further notes:

Sex is an expression of our existence as sexual beings. The Christian asserts, however, that this act as an expression of human sexuality carried even greater significance. Similar to every action the Christian performs, sex is to be understood within the context of the Christian life as a whole. Like every dimension of life, sexual expression must be placed under the parameters of our fundamental commitment to the Lordship of Christ. As a result, the Christian seeks to understand the sex act theologically, that is, in terms of what is being said thereby about the self, the nature of life, and ultimately about God.³³

The sexual union must be within the marital bond for it to be meaningful as God designed it to be. However, when the act is engaged in improperly it simply becomes an expression of self-gratification, adultery, infidelity or exploitation.³⁴

The sex act within marital bond is the sacrament of the marriage covenant. It is an outward act which signifies an inward commitment. Sexual intercourse makes every couple to become one flesh and it symbolizes their becoming a unity of persons as Apostle Paul indicates to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:15-16) which is built on Genesis 2:24. Sex within marriage context is a re-enactment, reaffirmation and symbolic embodiment of the marriage vow. Sex deepens the commitment of partners to each other and to their life together. Stanley Grenz notes that:

In sexual intercourse intimacy is freely given and received.

The commitment to give oneself freely and to receive from the other in freedom is visually and physically enacted through this intimate sexual relation. As this occurs the sex act points to the various ways in which the partners give to and receive from each other in day-to-day life together. And by this act the partners renew their commitment to the task of giving and receiving freely, which they expressed in their marriage vows.³⁵

The Yoruba Marriage and Custom

The Yoruba tribe is located in the south Western part of Nigeria, that is, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos and Ekiti States; and parts of Kwara, Kogi and Edo.³⁶ Marriage is regarded highly among the Yoruba as it occupies a unique position in the Yoruba society. Marriage is not just a union between the groom and his bride but rather a union between two families or even between clans.

Usually, parents have a major role in selecting and deciding who their son or daughter is married to. This explains why a thorough investigation is carried out from the *Ifa* priest of the family background to which their son or daughter will be married. They will like to avoid a situation where their son or daughter is married to a blood relation. They will like to be convinced that there is no dangerous hereditary disease like leprosy, epilepsy, insanity or tuberculosis in the family. Also, they will make sure that the family is not notorious for debt, murder, evil magic and stubbornness.³⁸ Writing on the investigation to be carried out before the consent is given, Fadipe notes:

The inquiry was invariably extended to cover the moral and

social qualities of both father and mother- particularly, the latter- and generally, of other relatives on both sides. It was concerned with whether the mother was of a quarrelsome disposition and fiery temper, whether she was an idle, shiftless woman 'with no work in hand', whether she or he husband or anyone within their family was given to theft, or in the habit of contracting and accumulating debts. These and the preceding inquiries were necessary in order to ensure not only soundness of stock (and, thus, to eliminate as far as possible the risk of a union which would bring shame or unhappiness upon the family), but also to guarantee the peace of members of the family, and to avoid being saddled with debts to which they were no party.³⁹

Apart from consulting *Ifa* oracle for guidance on the choice of marriage partner, the Yoruba has *Alarina* who is an "intermediary" between the man and the woman. The *Alarina* who can be a male or female is known to the two families. His assignment is reduced the moment the intending couple get to know each other.⁴⁰ It should be mentioned that there are other ceremonies like *Ijohun*, consent or approval, *Idamo*, introduction/engagement etc before the wedding itself.⁴¹

Speaking of the purpose of marriage among the Yoruba, it is interesting to note that it has some similarities with what has been discussed in Genesis 2:18-25. In other words, marriage is for companionships among Yoruba. A man goes into marriage with his wife or wives so that they can be of assistance to one another in every aspect of their lives: family, occupation, religion etc.⁴² Giving reasons for marriage, Adekoya notes:

People get married in order to get somebody to look after the home establishment, somebody to help in selling farm products on the market days, somebody to cook and take care of the compound.⁴³

Perhaps the most important reason for marriage in the Yoruba society is for procreation. In other words, great importance is attached to children and marriage that is not blessed with children is regarded accursed and complete failure. It is commonly said in Yorubaland that "*Omo ni iyi, Omo ni eye igbeyawo*" which literally means "child is the pride and joy of marriage". This explains why delay in having child(ren) often leads to serious problems which at times lead to divorce. Therefore, it is obvious that sex is viewed mainly as a means of procreation. This tendency is revealed in Yoruba statements like "*je ka sere omo*", that is, "let us play the game that leads to children", which is another euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁴⁴

The Yoruba society frowns at pre-marital sex. Sexual satisfaction is strictly reserved for married people. Even a betrothed wife is not expected to have sex with her fiancé or anybody until her bridal night. Thus, it is usually a thing of pride for the bride and members of her family on the night of wedding if she is found to be a virgin. It is a sign of her faithfulness while with her parents. On the other hand, it is shameful for the bride and her parents if it is discovered that she had known a man prior to the wedding night.

(Giwamna notes:

Virginity was highly upheld as sexual promiscuity was an abomination. Unwanted pregnancies and bastards were not accepted in most African societies. Betrothal did not allow for "trial marriage" or sex which has now become a norm in some African societies.⁴⁵

Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that marriage is God's ordained institution for mutual love, companionship and procreation. Marriage as discussed in Genesis 2:18-25 is a covenant between the bride and groom. Monogamous union is particularly encouraged as emphasis is placed on individuals. However, marriage in the Yoruba culture is a family affair. The parents and the members of the family have much to say especially as various ceremonies are involved. Polygamous union is allowed as the man is free to marry more than one wife, provided he is able to take care of them.

On the issue of sex, the paper has shown that both the Bible and the Yoruba custom frown at pre-marital sex while sex within the context of marriage is good and biblical. For the Yoruba, it is assumed that sexual relations will take place after marriage. Writing on the importance of sexuality in the Yoruba culture, J. O. Kayode notes:

Good sexual relations within marriage help to strengthen the union and even when the union has been slightly weakened, the act of sexual relations can help to restore such a union. Apart from ill-health of either of the couple, the monthly period of the woman and breast feeding, sexual starvation from either of the party would constitute a danger for the peace of them.⁴⁶

Furthermore, marriage in Genesis 2:18-25 is a permanent affair which cannot be dissolved. In other words, no matter the situation or circumstance that confronts the couple, divorce is not allowed. However, even though divorce is not promoted in the Yoruba culture, yet it is allowed as the last resort especially in the case of laziness, drunkenness, bad company or infectious disease.⁴⁷

Endnotes

¹Kayode Fayemi and Mike Jimoh "Divorce: Why Celeb homes are crumbling" *Sunday Sun* (March 12, 2006), pp. 46-7.

²Francis Brown; S.R. Driver; & Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs- Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with An Appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), p. 773. Henceforth known as BDB.

³William F. Arndt & Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, Second Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 151.

⁴William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, the Gospel of Matthew* Volume 2 Chapters 11-28. Revised Edition (Burlington, Ontario: G.R. Welch, 1975), p.196.

⁵Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), p.277.

⁶Henri Blocher, *In The Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), p.107.

⁷D.J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984), p. 77.

⁸Ibid.

⁹For detail, See John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), p. 52.

¹⁰BDB, p. 740.

¹¹G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books Publishers, 1987), p. 68.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Volume One (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1942), p. 130.

¹⁵BDB, p. 922.

¹⁶G. Ch. Aalder, *Bible Student's Commentary: Genesis*, Volume One (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 95.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Matthew Henry. *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible in Six Volumes*, Carefully Revised and Corrected (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Company, 1706), 1:20.

¹⁹For poetic explanation of this verse, see G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 70.

²⁰Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning*, p. 104.

²¹*BDB*, pp. 736-7.

²²G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 70.

²³*BDB*, p. 179.

²⁴G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 71.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Hillel and his followers felt that a man could divorce his for almost any reason but Shammai and his followers thought that one could not divorce his wife unless she was guilty of sexual offence. For detail, see notes on Matthew 19:3 in *The New International Study Bible*, p. 1469 and William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study: The Gospel of Matthew Volume 2 Chapters 11-28*, pp. 198-9.

²⁸*BDB*, p. 736.

²⁹G.J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 71.

³⁰Ed Wheat & Gaye Wheat, *Intended for Pleasure* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell. Co., 1981), p. 22.

³¹*Ibid.* p. 20.

³²Stanley A. Ellisen, *Divorce and Remarried in the Church*, Revised and Enlarged Edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), p. 62.

³³*Ibid.* p. 65.

³⁴For other forms of sexual perversions, see Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, pp. 284-5.

³⁵Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), p. 69.

³⁶For details, see N.A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: University Press, 1970), pp.29-35 and J.A. Atanda, *An Introduction to the Yoruba History* (Ibadan: University Press, 1980), p. 1.

³⁷M.O. Oloyede, "The Comparative Study of the Concept of Jewish and Yoruba Traditional Marriages" A Long Essay Submitted to the Faculty in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Theology at the United Misionary Church of Africa Theological College, Ilorin (May 2006), p. 62.

³⁸J. Omosade Awolalu & P. Adelumo Dopamu. *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press, 1979), p. 178.

³⁹Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, p.71.

⁴⁰Awolalu & Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion*, p. 179.

⁴¹*Ibid.* pp. 180-183.

⁴²Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, p. 66.

⁴³M. I. Adekoya, "An Examination of Biblical Concept of Marriage in Genesis 2:18-25 and its relevance to Yoruba Culture". A Long Essay Submitted to the Faculty in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Theology at the United Misionary Church of Africa Theological College, Ilorin (May 2005), p. 67.

⁴⁴Olubiyi Adeniyi Adewale, "Building a Biblical African View of Sex: An Understanding of I Corinthians 7:1-5" A Paper Presented at the 18th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies held at Delta State University, Abraka on 19-22 July, 2005, p. 5.

⁴⁵Gwamna Dogara Je'adayibe, "Biblical Teaching(s) on Marriage and Sex: A Case Study of Leviticus 18 & 20." A Commissioned Paper Delivered at the 18th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies held at Delta State University, Abraka on 19-22 July, 2005, p. 14.

⁴⁶J.O. Kayode, "African Ethics on Sex." *In Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, Edited by S.O. Abogunrin (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1986), p. 53.

⁴⁷Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba*, p. 90.