

The Verse Everyone Thinks They Understand

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[Genesis 2:18-24](#), Psalm 8, Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12, Mark 10:2-16

If there is one verse that everybody seems to think that they understand completely in the Bible, it has got to be the verse that ends our reading this morning from Genesis. **“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife,”** it says, **“and they become one flesh.”**

Everybody I talk to tells me that they know exactly what that verse means. They say that it means that the Bible is laying out for us the prescriptive model for one of the most fundamental relationships of society, the marriage. It is saying that it is God’s will that marriage take a very particular form of one man, one woman committed for life.

Now there is no question in my mind that this verse affirms such a marriage. And that is significant. But I do have all kinds of questions about what sort of instruction we are supposed to take from it.

Polygynous Marriage

For example, if this verse was so clear that a marriage was supposed to be between one man and one woman, why is it that almost nobody in the Old Testament seems to have understood that. The dominant model for marriage throughout most of the Old Testament is not monogamy but rather polygyny – that is, marriage between one man and several women. Many of the key characters of the Bible including most of the patriarchs and all of the kings had several wives.

If God had clearly told humanity that they were only allowed one, these Bible characters certainly didn’t get the memo! And none of them are ever criticized in the scriptures for their marriages.

Troubled Marriages

Yes, you might say to me, but doesn’t the Bible also tell us that many of these marriages were full of strife and trouble. Yes, it does. But nobody ever takes that as a reason not to have such a marriage. Generation after generation, men continued to take multiple wives. And that doesn’t surprise me in the least. We do the same thing when it comes to monogamous marriage.

I have seen many monogamous marriages that have been full of strife and argument. I have been first-hand witness to a number that have outright failed. And yet I still believe in monogamous marriage. I was very pleased and honoured to be able to celebrate one here just yesterday. No, there’s really nothing that the Bible says for or against the polygynous marriages of many of its heroes.

Who Says This?

So, let’s go back to that verse in Genesis chapter 2 and ask what it is really trying to teach us about marriage. Let me ask you a question about it that has baffled me for a long time.



Who says it? In whose voice are we supposed to hear, **“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife...”**?

Up until this point in the story, there have only been two speaking parts: the Creator and the man. And this verse comes at the very end of the first thing that the man says, his jubilant celebration of the woman. But the man doesn't seem to say this bit about marriage. Nor does this saying come to us in the voice of God. Everything that God has said in this story has been introduced by the words, **“and the LORD God said.”** So, if it's not God who says this and it's not the man who says it, then who does? It seems to be a commentary inserted into the story by the narrators.

An Abnormal Marriage

But, if it is a commentary, it is a bit of an odd one. Because what it describes is actually not what would have been considered a normal marriage at the time when the Bible was written. The pattern of marriage throughout the entire biblical period was actually pretty clear. The normal cultural practice was for a *woman* to leave her mother and father's house to be joined with her husband. People lived, not as nuclear families as we know them, but as extended families. And a wife was always expected to move in and live with her husband's household.

But this verse describes the opposite, doesn't it? It speaks of a man leaving his family to be joined to his wife. This was not considered normal in the world of the Bible. In fact, when we find such marriages in the Bible, they are usually condemned! For example, in the Book of Numbers, an Israelite man named Zimri deserts his tribe and family in order to marry a Midianite woman named Cozbi. (Numbers 25: 14, 15) This marriage is seen as so unacceptable that a priest runs the two of them through with a spear killing them both.

In the Book of Ezra, a similar thing happens when many Israelite men marry foreign women and Ezra forces them all to abandon both their wives and children. (Ezra 9-10) So, apparently this kind of marriage was not only unusual, it was actually seen as something that undermined the normal order of society. And yet, here in Genesis, it seems to be saying that, because of how God created humanity, this kind of marriage could happen and could result with the unusually married people becoming “one flesh,” forming a unique bond and connection.

It Can't be the One True Pattern

So what is this final verse really saying? It can't be merely laying out the one true pattern for all marriages for all time because it actually describes a kind of marriage that was considered unusual and perhaps even threatening to the ancient Israelites.

I think that, in order to answer that question, we need to go back and ask what this entire story is really here to do. What is the author trying to say to us. I can't really accept that this passage is meant to be a simple and straightforward explanation of how human beings came to be. There are numerous problems with reading the story that way.

More than Historical

All of the evidence we have found on the origin of the human species absolutely contradicts the notion that we can somehow be traced back to two people in a garden in northern Mesopotamia.

What's more, this story also contradicts the creation story in Genesis chapter one when it says that the order of creation was first a man, then all of the animals and then a woman. These things among others make me think that this was never intended to be taken as a literal account of historical events.

Rather than a simple historical account, what this is meant to be is a story that is told to teach us about what it means to be human, what our relationship is to the world around us, to animals and to our God. And it is especially about what it means to be in relationship with other humans, especially in marriage relationships.

The Creation of the Woman

And that makes the story of the creation of the woman particularly meaningful. Because it is, above all, a story about the human need for companionship and partnership. This need cannot be fulfilled by the animals, no matter how wonderful they may be. We need someone who can be a partner and helper.

And clearly the reason why the man in this story rejoices in the woman is because they are made of the same stuff. **"This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,"** the man cries. And this makes a lot of sense because the story depicts God creating the woman from something God takes from the side of the man.

What Came from the Side?

The Hebrew word, by the way, is not very specific on that point. The thing that God takes from the side of the man is usually translated as "rib" because that kind of makes sense. I mean, what else would you take from the side? But the Hebrew word is not that precise. We cannot know if that is what is intended.

But whatever exactly God takes, the meaning of the surgery is clear. Somehow the human that existed before it contained the fullness of humanity in one being. Both what would become the male and what would become the female were present in the original creation and God separates that into two distinct beings.

God's creation, when first placed in the garden is simply called *adam*, which is the generic Hebrew word for a human. Only after the separation surgery do the Hebrew words for man and woman (which are *ish* and *ishah*) appear.

God Creates the Distinctions

What that seems to be saying is that the things that divide us – the differences that often set us apart from one another – including the distinction of gender but also the distinctions between race and tribe and ethnicity – have been created for us by God because of our need. We need one another and we need the differences that sometimes separate us because we complete one another. That is what allows us to be helpers who are partners to one another.

So that is what this story is all about – about how God made us in all of our diversity for each other. That is a lesson not just about marriage but also about friendship and teamwork and all kinds of other human relationships as well. And it is perhaps also a warning that, when we stop

respecting the differences that we encounter in the other person, we will miss out on the meaning and richness that God has intended for us.

And, if that is what this story is about, then what is the meaning of the enigmatic statement at the end of the story: **“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”**

An Application of the Story

Well, I have come to understand it much like I suggested – as the narrators dropping in a commentary for the audience. They are speaking directly to the people listening to this story and giving them a direct application to their situation.

In particular, I would suggest that they are speaking to parents, for example, who are upset with their son because he didn't want to go through with the perfectly sensible marriage that they had set up for him. You know, the parents had done what good parents did and arranged a marriage with a couple of nice girls from good families from the next village over.

But then, did that son want to go through with that perfectly normal and acceptable marriage? No, he did not! Instead he decided to leave his mother and father and go and cling to a woman that his parents had never even met from an entirely different tribe! Can you imagine!

Yes, the narrators are speaking to all manner of parents who are upset because their children have opted for marriages that do not conform to their norms and expectations. And they are basically saying, “Eh, what are you going to do? That's just how God created humans to be. For this reason they have the tendency to want to cling to who their parents think are all the wrong people. And if God created us that way, I guess maybe it will probably all work out.

A Lesson for Today

I once thought that I understood exactly what this verse in the Book of Genesis meant, but the closer I look at it the less obvious that meaning seems. I no longer think that it is intended to tell people what sort of relationship they are allowed to have. Instead, I have come to believe that it recognizes that people enter into all kinds of relationships.

I would take away this lesson from it. If anyone has ever looked at your marriage or some other key relationship in your life and judged it because it didn't fit their idea of what was normal or acceptable, this is talking to you. It is encouraging you to remember that love does find a way even in relationships that don't fit somebody else's ideal.

Relationships of Love and Respect

It is saying that, if your relationship is based on clinging together through the good and the bad, if you love and respect each other for who God created you to be, then you are living up to what God created you to be.

And if, on the other hand, you are ever tempted to judge someone else's relationship because it doesn't fit your predetermined idea of what shape it is supposed to take – if that is all you can see and you can't see the depth of love and commitment that is there because of it, maybe it is speaking to you as well and encouraging you to look again.