

**NB: This is an earlier version of the paper, written for a non-academic audience.**

## **“Set in Tradition and History”: Gen 2:24 and the Marriage Debate**

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In a newspaper interview in early 2012 the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, described marriage as “a gift from God in Creation,” going on to say, “Marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman and that’s marriage.” The Archbishop’s comments came in the context of debate in Britain about the definition of marriage and proposals for the broadening of the institution of marriage to include marriage of same-sex couples. His response was a denial of the role of the state in such matters, “I don’t think it is the role of the state to define what marriage is. It is set in tradition and history and you can’t just [change it] overnight, no matter how powerful you are.”

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Although Archbishop Sentamu didn’t explicitly reference his comments, it is safe to assume that he had in mind post-scriptural tradition based on Gen 2:24.<sup>3</sup> This verse, found in the biblical creation narratives, is sometimes understood as instituting and defining marriage as the life-long union of one man and one woman. Some interpreters read Gen 2:24 as part of a “creation-mandate” for marriage, although the surface of Gen 2:24 is more a description of familiar experience than a prescriptive mandate such as that found in Gen 1:28.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Mark G Brett and Richard A Burrige for their comments in response to an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Beckford, (27 January 2012), “Don’t Legalise Gay Marriage, Archbishop of York John Sentamu warns David Cameron”, *The Telegraph* (London) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9045796/Dont-legalise-gay-marriage-Archbishop-of-York-Dr-John-Sentamu-warns-David-Cameron.html>).

<sup>3</sup> Not only the gospel writers (Mk 10:2-12; Matt 19: 3-9) but also Paul (1 Cor 6:16) use imagery from Gen 2:24 in writing about issues connected with marriage. Discussion of these New Testament passages and post-biblical traditions connected with them is beyond the scope of this paper. See William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 61-120 for a full discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Discussion of Gen 1:28 is likewise beyond the scope of this paper because although Gen 1:28 addresses procreation it does not concern itself with marriage.

This essay will revisit Gen 2:24 in the light of current conversations in church and society about the definition of marriage. In particular, it will focus on the question whether Gen 2:24 can, or ought to, be understood as divine pronouncement that defines marriage. Put shortly, is Gen 2:24 a biblical warrant for marriage as the union of a man and woman, to the exclusion of all other unions?<sup>5</sup> And does Gen 2:24 reflect a biblical understanding of marriage that is now set in tradition and history, so that it cannot be changed?

### **Gen 2:24 in its literary context**

Gen 2:24 is situated near the end of a brief narrative about God's creation of men and women. The narrative begins in Gen 2:18 with God's reflection that the 'earth creature' (*adam* in Hebrew) formed by God from the dust of the earth (*adamah*) is alone, and that this aloneness is "not good." To this point in the text all created things have been seen by God to be either "good" or "very good," so the problem is striking!<sup>6</sup> God immediately proposes a solution – the creation of a helper to be with the *adam*.<sup>7</sup> God creates animals and birds and brings them to the earth creature to be named. However, none of the animals or birds is found to be a helper for the *adam*. A more radical solution is therefore required. God causes a deep sleep to fall upon the *adam* and removes one of the *adam*'s ribs. From the rib God makes a woman (*ishshah*) and brings her, like the animals and birds before her, to the *adam* to be named. This time there is success. The *adam* accepts the gift of the woman with a

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Gen 2:24, conversely, addresses marriage (or at least marriage-like relationships) but not procreation. For a recent expression of the argument that Genesis 1-3 constitutes essential context for the right understanding of all aspects of sexuality see *Sexegesis: An Evangelical Response to Five Uneasy Pieces on Sexuality* (ed. Gordon Preece and Michael Bird) (Brisbane: Youthworks, 2012), especially the contributions of Gordon Preece and Lindsay Wilson.

<sup>5</sup> Section 5 of the Australian *Marriage Act* (Cwlth) 1961 defines marriage to mean "the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life." This definition was inserted into the Act in 2004 to counter uncertainty whether the Act, in its pre-2004 form, permitted same-sex marriage.

<sup>6</sup> See Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31. The graduation from "good" to "very good" comes as God surveys the totality of the created order, including humankind.

<sup>7</sup> The use of the word 'helper' should not be understood as implying the inferiority of the woman to the man. The Hebrew word *'ezer* is most closely associated in the biblical texts with the imagery of God as helper.

pronouncement that includes a word play: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called ‘woman’ (*ishshah*), for out of ‘man’ (*ish*) this one was taken.”<sup>8</sup>

This wordplay signifies the *adam*’s acceptance of the gift of the *ishsha*, but it also does two additional and new things. First, the concept of gender is introduced to the larger story.<sup>9</sup> Prior to this the human being has been identified in the text only as ‘earth creature’ (*adam*) – there has been no need for gender distinction. With the creation of the second human-being, however, distinction between the man (*ish*) and the woman (*ishshah*) becomes necessary. Secondly, the *adam*’s wordplay underscores also the connection between the two human beings: the idea of the narrative that one is derived from the other is reflected in their names, *ish* and *ishshah*. A similarly derivative relationship had already been illustrated by means of a wordplay in Gen 2:7, in which the *adam* (earth-creature) is derived from the *adamah* (earth).<sup>10</sup>

Our verse, Gen 2:24, follows immediately. There is a bit of a jolt from one verse to the next. While the narrator has remained discreetly in the background until this point, suddenly the narratorial voice intervenes to comment upon a social reality belonging not to the time of the narrated story, but to the narrator’s own time:<sup>11</sup>

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Gen 2:24)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew word for ‘man’, *ish*, is not used in the text until a distinction between genders becomes necessary with the creation of woman, *ishshah*. In this way the language underscores the significance and consequences of the creation of the first woman. See the extended discussion of the word-play in Phyllis Trible, ‘A Love Story Gone Awry’, in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 72-143.

<sup>9</sup> Note that the concept of gender is already present in the first of what scholars often identify as two creation narratives (Gen 1-2:4a). See Gen 1:27.

<sup>10</sup> It is true that the parallel is not exact. In the case of earth/earth-creature the name of the derived being is shorter than the entity from which it is derived, while in the case of man/woman the derived being has the longer name.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word, 1987) 70: “This is not a continuation of the man’s remarks in v23, but a comment of the narrator, applying the principles of the first marriage to every marriage.”

<sup>12</sup> Translations are from the NRSV.

The introduction of the concepts of ‘father’ and ‘mother’ indicates that the phenomenon being described does not belong to the world of the story, in which there is yet no concept of familial relationship, and in which there has been no hint of the existence of human beings other than the two already introduced to the reader. As a result, the reader is momentarily thrown off-balance, until the story resumes, and concludes, in Gen 2:25: “And the *adam* and his *ishshah* were both naked, and were not ashamed.”

There has been much scholarly interest in the origins of Gen 2:24. The consensus is that the verse is an editorial addition to the text that reflects the interests and concerns of a later period.<sup>13</sup> It is often described as an ‘etiology’ – a statement or story that explains something. Some scholars take the view that Gen 2:24 is an etiological gloss. In other words, it ‘adopts’ its context in order to explain something that may not have been part of the concern of the original text. A classification of Gen 2:24 as etiological still leaves some important questions of interpretation to be answered. For example, if Gen 2:24 is an etiology, what is it an etiology of? Does it explain the phenomenon of marriage, or merely the attraction between men and women?<sup>14</sup> Further, if the subject of marriage is indeed within the contemplation of Gen 2:24, does the verse account for the phenomena it describes, or does it set out to normalise it? In other words, is it appropriate to interpret Gen 2:24 on the level of ‘juridical etiology’ (an explanation or foundation of what one *must* do, i.e., prescriptive), or is the verse etiological merely on the factual level (an explanation of what one *does* do, i.e., descriptive)?<sup>15</sup>

These questions are vital for any reader of Gen 2:24 who is interested in the topic of same-sex marriage and who wants to know whether Gen 2:24 announces a

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<sup>13</sup> See most helpfully the discussion of Angelo Tosato, ‘On Genesis 2:24’, *CBQ* 52 (1990): 389-409, esp. pp. 390-395, and the other references mentioned there.

<sup>14</sup> Although the weight of scholarly opinion has sometimes favoured the latter view (suggesting that Gen 2:24 need not be considered to be concerned with marriage at all) it is difficult to say with any degree of certainty which is correct. For the proposition that Gen 2:24 is not concerned with the institution of marriage, but rather the attraction between the sexes, see, for example, G von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 1972) 84-85. For the opposite view see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 233-34. See also Tosato’s discussion, ‘On Genesis 2:24’, pp. 398-409, and the further references mentioned there.

<sup>15</sup> This question is posed by Tosato, ‘On Genesis 2:24’ 405.

prescription for heterosexual marriage that must as a consequence exclude the possibility of divine countenance of marriage between two people of the same gender.

We have already seen that the narrative in which Gen 2:24 is set, Gen 2:18-25, is intrinsically concerned with the topic of companionship. Companionship is presented as the solution to the problem of the earth creature's 'aloneness'. Here the very beginnings of the phenomenon of gender are chronicled. From the outset, this passage tells us, the distinction between genders has been to do with companionship, and with the need of one gender for the other. On the other hand, Gen 2:18-23, 25 is not focally concerned with the topic of marriage.

Gen 2:24, conversely, may indeed be concerned with the topic of marriage, but is gender the central concern? Gen 2:24 describes a relationship between a man and a woman, but does it intend thereby to exclude other types of relationship?<sup>16</sup> Did the editor who added Gen 2:24 have it in mind to restrict marriage to mixed-gender relationships, or might he or she have had some other motivation, some other agenda?

To answer these questions we will need to consider the wider biblical context and, secondly, explore Gen 2:24 itself in more detail.

### **Sexuality and Marriage in the Old Testament**

The books of the Old Testament do not display any great interest in the topic of homosexuality. In fact there are only two verses in the entire Old Testament 'library' that address the topic of homosexuality in any direct way: Lev 18:22 and 20:13.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Notably, the love between David and Jonathan certainly portrays deep companionship, "greater than the love of women", even if we need not think about this relationship in sexual terms.

<sup>17</sup> The present author has argued elsewhere that two narratives sometimes associated with the topic of homosexuality, Genesis 19 and Judges 19, are concerned with other topics and do not address the issue of homosexuality. See Megan Warner, 'Were the Sodomites Really Sodomites? Homosexuality in Genesis 19' in *Five Uneasy Pieces*, 1-9. For a discussion of the Leviticus verses see the essay by Richard Treloar in the same volume, 'On "Not Putting New Wine into Old Wineskins" or "Taking the Bible Fully Seriously": An Anglican Reading of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13', 13-28. Note that there is no reference, whether direct or indirect, to lesbianism in any Old Testament book: see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) 1786-87.

The Old Testament books do display, however, a great deal of interest in the broader topics of sexuality and marriage, and, just as the issue of homosexuality is politically sensitive today, so the biblical text addresses issues of sexuality and marriage that were politically sensitive at the time of writing. Two of the most prominent such issues, judging from the biblical evidence, were incest and marriage across ethnic boundaries. It is not difficult to see that the issue of inter-marriage, in particular, was a hot-topic during the period of Persian occupation following the late sixth-century BCE return from Babylonian exile – the period when scholars are generally agreed that the Pentateuch, at least, was edited.<sup>18</sup> The accounts of Ezra’s demand that the returnees send away their foreign wives and children point to a high degree of public debate and anxiety.<sup>19</sup>

These accounts, found in Ezra 9-10 and Nehemiah 13, are by no means the only texts indicating opposition to marriages between Israelites and foreigners. The books of the Pentateuch include several express prohibitions of inter-marriage. For some of these passages, including Exod 34:16 and Deut 7:3-4 (and also Josh 23:12), the fear associated with inter-marriage is that those marrying foreigners will be seduced into the worship of foreign gods. In later texts, such as Ezra and Nehemiah, the nature of the threat posed by inter-marriage is less clear. Other Old Testament narratives that address concerns about inter-marriage include Genesis 34, Numbers 25 and 1 Kings 11.<sup>20</sup>

The dangers of incest are also highlighted in a variety of ways in Old Testament texts. The most obvious examples are the two chapters of Leviticus where the two prohibitions of sex between men are found, Lev 18 and 20, which are pre-occupied with setting out the various forms of relationships precluded as being incestuous. However, there are many instances of narrative that explore tensions around the topic

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Mark G Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the politics of identity* (London: Routledge, 2000) 28-40. ‘Pentateuch’ is a name often given to the first five books of the Old Testament.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent collection of essays on the topic of inter-marriage during the post-exilic period, see Christian Frevel, ed., *Mixed Marriages: Intermarriage and Group Identity in the Second Temple Period* (London: T&T Clark, 2011). For an anthropological approach, see Katherine E Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed-Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10: An Anthropological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Not an exhaustive list.

of incest. Examples are Abraham's marriage to his sister (Genesis 20 and see also Genesis 12 and 26) and Amnon's seduction of his sister Tamar (2 Sam 13).

Interestingly, these twin concerns, inter-marriage and incest, can be seen as occupying opposite ends of a spectrum, on which inter-marriage represents the extreme of marrying 'out', while incest represents the extreme of marrying 'in'.<sup>21</sup> Some Old Testament narratives explore both ends of this spectrum. For example, in Genesis 20 Abraham exposes his sister-wife to the amorous inclinations of a foreign king, while in Genesis 34 Dinah's brothers go to extreme lengths to keep her in the family home, thereby denying Dinah the opportunity, afforded by the law, of a semi-respectable marriage to her foreign seducer.<sup>22</sup>

Just as the biblical authors wrote narrative to help themselves and others to understand the issues of their time, so readers today quite properly look to the Bible for guidance about today's issues, if they regard this library as scripture. This is true of questions about homosexuality, despite the relatively few explicit references to that topic in biblical texts. Genesis 2 is one text that many have consulted in this regard. For example, Lindsay Wilson writes that Genesis 2 is a crucial context for the reading of other parts of Genesis, and that Genesis 2 "in particular, sets out the foundations of sexuality and relationship", "rul[ing] out, among other possibilities, a same-sex (male-male or female-female) marriage."<sup>23</sup> In our enthusiasm to find guidance for today's issues in the text, however, we ought not to overlook the possibility that a given piece of biblical text may have been shaped in direct response to a contentious issue of its own time. Might this be true of Gen 2:24? In order to answer this question we need to look more closely at the verse itself.

### **Gen 2:24 in close-up**

One of the special features of Gen 2:24 is the presence of some very distinctive language, and it will be helpful to move through it word by word.

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<sup>21</sup> For an extended discussion of the relationship between the issues of incest and inter-marriage, see Claudia V Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> See Deut 22:28-29; Camp, *Wise Strange and Holy* 279-322; Lyn M Bechtel, 'What if Dinah is Not Raped?' *JOT* 62 (1994) 19-36.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, 'Let Sodom be Sodom! Another Look at Genesis 19', *Sexegesis* 48-64, 52.

The opening word/construction, *'al-kken* (therefore), is significant in that it establishes a connection between Gen 2:24 and what precedes it, so that even if Gen 2:24 is understood as additional to its context it has been made dependent on it. The sense is that the phenomenon described in Gen 2:24 is the consequence of the events described in the preceding narrative - in other words, of Yahweh's creation of a companion for the *adam*.

The second point to note is that the gender-distinctive language *ish* and *ishsha* first used in Gen 2:23 is used again in Gen 2:24. Gen 2:24 adopts the word-play of the previous verse, and can be distinguished from Gen 2:25 in which the two terms *adam* and *ishsha* are used. The use in v 24 of the alliterative terms points to a degree of equality between the man and the woman, so that English translations (such as the NRSV) that translate *ish* as 'man' and *ishsha* as 'wife' rather than 'woman' (the Hebrew word can mean either) miss something of the sense of the original.

The next important word is the verb 'to abandon/forsake' ('*zv*'), translated as 'leaves' in many English translations of Gen 2:24. The verb '*zv*' is not especially uncommon in the Old Testament, appearing 216 times, with a range of meanings. Sometimes '*zv*' is used in contexts that indicate the simple sense 'to leave'. An example is Gen 39:12, in which Joseph 'leaves' his garment in the hand of Potiphar's wife in his urgency to escape her advances. (Even in this case the urgency suggests that the context is not simple.) However, '*zv*' is more often used in the Old Testament with the more dramatic sense 'to abandon' or 'to forsake'. This is the case, for example, in the many instances in which the verb is used in relation to Israel's propensity to betray Yahweh by the worship of other gods. For example:

“It is because they abandoned ('*zv*') the covenant of Yahweh ... ” (Deut 29:25)

“If you forsake ('*zv*') the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” (Josh 24:20)

“Yet you have abandoned ('*zv*') me and worshipped other gods, ... (Judg 10:6)

The same term is used in respect of Yahweh's commitment to Israel, which Yahweh will not break, despite Israel's fickleness:

It is the LORD your God who goes with you, he will not fail you or forsake ('*zv*') you. (Deut 31:6)



“I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake (‘זָו) my people Israel. (1 Kgs 6:13)

The sense in each of these verses is that an act of abandoning, or forsaking, somebody in a relational context is a serious matter, with consequences for the ongoing life of the relationship. Moreover, in the context of the divine relationship, an act of ‘זָו is akin to adultery, in which Yahweh is betrayed when the Israelites go after other gods.

The translation of the verb ‘זָו in most English translations of Genesis 2:24 as ‘leaves’, then, is a relatively pale rendering.<sup>24</sup> Much of the strength of the Hebrew verb is lost.<sup>25</sup> The verb is generally understood in the sense that the man leaves his parents’ house. Yet the word ‘house’ does not appear in the text – the man ‘leaves’ or, better, ‘abandons’ or ‘forsakes’ his parents themselves. The ‘abandoning’ or ‘forsaking’ of one’s parents is not generally something encouraged in the Hebrew Scriptures! On the contrary, one of their foundational directives is the injunction to ‘honour’ one’s father and one’s mother. (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) In the face of this commandment, Gen 2:24’s description of ‘forsaking’ or ‘abandoning’ of parents is surprising. Brett goes further:

“The idea of ‘abandoning’ parents represents a potentially scandalous subversion of the conventional Israelite obligations to mother and father ...”<sup>26</sup>

A second verb also demands our attention. The verb ‘to cling’ (*dbq*) appears 61 times in the Hebrew Bible. Again, the 61 instances of *dbq* reflect a range of different contexts and meanings, but the most common use for the word is to indicate the proper attitude of the Israelites to Yahweh, which is to ‘cling’ or ‘hold fast’ to their God. A good example is Deut 13:4:

The LORD your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast (*dbq*).

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<sup>24</sup> English-language translations that adopt the translation ‘leave’ owe something to the King James Version, which introduced a word play between ‘leave’ and ‘cleave’. With many later English translations (including the NRSV) forgoing ‘cleave’ in favor of ‘clings’ the word play has been lost.

<sup>25</sup> Brett, *Genesis* 31.

<sup>26</sup> Brett, *Genesis* 36. See also Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 71: “... in traditional societies like Israel where honoring parents is the highest human obligation next to honoring God, this remark about forsaking them is very striking.”

Other examples may be found in Deut 4:4; 10:20; 11:22; 30:20; Josh 22:5; 23:8; 2 Kgs 18:6; Jer 13:11 and Ps 119:31. An inversion of this idea is found in 2 Kgs 3:3 where the evil King Jehoram, son of Ahab, is said to have clung not to Yahweh, but to the sins of Jeroboam.

When used in this sense, *dbq* can be seen as the polar opposite of *ʿzv*. Israel should not have *forsaken* Yahweh, but should have *clung* to her God.

Another context in which the verb *dbq* is used is that of marriage or romantic love. In the discussion above we asked whether Gen 2:24 should be understood as a verse about marriage. We saw that many scholars take the view that the marriage relationship is in view in Gen 2:24, and, if not marriage, then certainly romantic love. Of the 61 times that the verb *dbq* is used in the Hebrew Bible, four other instances are clearly associated with marriage (or romantic love):

And his soul clung (*dbq*) to Dinah, daughter of Jacob, ... (Gen 34:3)

For if you turn back and join the survivors of these nations left here among you, and cling (*dbq*) with them, so that you marry their women and they yours, ... (Josh 23:12)

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the Israelites, “You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods”; Solomon clung (*dbq*) to these in love. (1 Kgs 11:2)

As you saw the iron mixed with clay, so will they mix with one another in marriage, but they will not hold together (*dbq*), just as iron does not mix with clay. (Dan 2:43)

The remarkable thing about these verses is that *all four concern not just marriage but inter-marriage*.<sup>27</sup> There is not one instance in the Old Testament (leaving aside for one moment Gen 2:24 itself) where the verb *dbq* is used in the context of marriage or romantic love and where the relationship(s) alluded to does *not* involve a bond between an Israelite and a foreigner.<sup>28</sup> In each case, what is more, inter-marriage is

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<sup>27</sup> Although Gen 34:3 is not a verse dealing explicitly with marriage, the context of inter-marriage is clear in other parts of the chapter.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to these passages, the verb *dbq* appears four times in the book of Ruth. The context there is not marriage, although elsewhere in this volume it is suggested that use of *dbq* in Ruth 1:14 indicates a marriage-like quality in the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. For our purposes here the significant point is that the

viewed as inherently problematic, primarily because its likely effect is to cause its participants to cling to foreign gods, rather than to Yahweh.

What should readers of Gen 2:24 make of this? Arguably they should ask themselves whether it is likely that the *best interpretation* of Gen 2:24 is that Gen 2:24 is unique in the Old Testament, as being the only place in which *dbq* is used in a context relating to marriage or romantic love *that does not also concern inter-marriage*. Do these other uses of *dbq* offer a hitherto unappreciated insight into the intent of the verse? This is not to suggest that canonical comparisons can resolve exegetical questions in the specific case of Gen. 2:24. But canonical comparisons might well send us back with fresh eyes to the particular text at issue.

There is a good argument to be made that these other uses of *dbq* may offer reliable guidance to interpretation. The two verbs, *'zv* and *dbq*, are both used in Gen 2:24, and used in contra-distinction to each other - an *ish* forsakes/abandons [*'zv*] his mother and his father but clings [*dbq*] to his *ishshah*. Not only *dbq* but also *'zv* relates to the idea of abandonment of Yahweh through the clinging to other gods. Terrien writes, in the context of a discussion of Gen 2:24:

Just as the verb “to forsake” implies the breaking of a covenant, so also the verb “to cleave” designates its maintenance, not only with outward respect for the commitment but also with the inner compulsion of love. The Deuteronomic style favors this notion whenever it refers to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, especially from the latter’s point of view: Israel is asked to *cleave* to Yahweh, *forsaking* all other gods ...”<sup>29</sup>

The same use of the two verbs, and contradistinction between them, is made in respect of King Solomon, famous for taking many foreign wives. Here the context is explicitly that of inter-marriage:

Solomon clung (*dbq*) to these in love. (1 Kgs 11:2)

“... he has forsaken (*'zv*) me, worshiped Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites, ... (1 Kgs 11:33)

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relationship between Naomi and Ruth is a relationship between an Israelite and a Moabite.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Terrien, *Till The Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) 15. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 70-71, also notes the connection of these verbs with covenant concepts.

The presence in Gen 2:24 of both verbs, so closely associated with the motif of Israel's fidelity to her God, Yahweh, suggests that the verse makes use of this motif to allude to the making of marriage alliances with foreigners – alliances understood to lead to a heightened risk of abandonment of Yahweh and the worship of other gods, as we've already seen.<sup>30</sup>

If we accept that *dbq* can be understood in Gen 2:24, as it is in each other places in the Old Testament in which it is used in the context of marriage or romantic love, as alluding to marriage or romantic love between Israelites and foreigners, then how should this understanding affect our interpretation of the verse? What it suggests is that Gen 2:24 can be read as an etiology designed to explain a phenomenon of men marrying foreign wives *in opposition* to the wishes of their parents and perhaps others as well. This etiology is descriptive in its grammar, and it may well refer to events during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the time of the Penrateuch's editors.

According to the text, this phenomenon is due to the attraction between men and women that exists as the consequence of the circumstances of their creation: marriage addresses a fundamental human need for companionship (pictured as a re-unification of what was once a single whole) which might even exceed the desire to honour one's parents' wishes.

How does this interpretation fit within the pattern of the rest of the book of Genesis? Strikingly, the phenomenon of parents arranging marriages for their sons, *in order that their sons will marry girls of their own nationality*, is prevalent in Genesis. So, for example, Abraham makes elaborate arrangements for a wife to be found for his son Isaac from among his own family (Genesis 24) and Isaac, in turn, sends his son Jacob to Abraham's family to find a wife, telling him, "You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women." Similarly, Hagar, the Egyptian mother of Abraham's son Ishmael, gets a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen 21:21) However, not all the patriarchal sons toe the family line. Isaac's son Esau marries two Hittite girls, much

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<sup>30</sup> See also Brett, *Genesis 37*; Terrien, *Till The Heart Sings* 15. The present author's doctoral thesis offers an extended study of a phenomenon of the editorial use in Genesis of (semi-)Deuteronomistic language and motifs for the purpose of subversion of Deuteronomistic ideology: Megan Warner, 'And I Will Remember My Covenant with Abraham: The Holiness School in Genesis' (MCD University of Divinity, 2011).

to the frustration of his parents. The reader is told that these foreign wives make life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:35), causing Rebekah to complain to Isaac:

“I am weary of my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women such as these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?” (Gen 27:46)

Similarly, Jacob’s daughter Dinah becomes entangled with a foreigner (this is another of the four uses of the verb *dbq* in a marriage context that we saw earlier), setting off waves of inter-ethnic violence.<sup>31</sup>

The rest of Genesis, then, bears witness both to a practice of parents seeking ethnically-appropriate partners for their children (usually sons) and to the phenomenon of sons choosing ethnically-inappropriate partners, to the frustration of their parents. In that regard, the rest of Genesis fits well with the interpretation suggested, even when considering simply the surface of the narrative regardless of its historical setting.

On the other hand, *traditional* interpretations of Gen 2:24 that argue that Gen 2:24 establishes a juridical or prescriptive etiology of marriage (what *should* be done) *do not* fit well with the rest of Genesis. These interpretations read Gen 2:24 as establishing a normative pattern by which a young man leaves his parents’ house and clings to his wife. There are two problems with this reading. First, as we’ve seen, Gen 2:24 does not speak of the *ish* abandoning/forsaking his parents’ *house* but simply his parents. Secondly, the marriage practice reflected in Genesis is not one whereby a man leaves the house of his parents in order to marry, but rather one in which a woman leaves the house of her parents to join her husband.<sup>32</sup> For example, when Isaac marries he brings his wife into his mother’s tent (Gen 24:67) and after

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<sup>31</sup> In that case, even though the text indicates that the young Hivite man in question seduced (perhaps even raped) Dinah, the real problem was not the violence of the seduction but the nationality of the suitor. Had Shechem been an Israelite rather than a Hivite, then Jacob would not have been so conflicted about taking advantage of laws making provision for the marriage of an unbetrothed girl to her seducer. (Genesis 34; Deut 22:28-29)

<sup>32</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* 70: “The traditional interpretation “leaves” suggests that the man moved from his parents and sets up home elsewhere, whereas in fact Israelite marriage was usually patrilocal, that is, the man continued to live in or near his parents’ home. It was the wife who left home to join her husband.”

Dinah is seduced by Shechem she is taken by him into Shechem's house (Gen 34:26).<sup>33</sup>

These observations support the interpretation being suggested here (while casting some doubt upon traditional readings) - the body of the book of Genesis is not only intimately concerned with issues around inter-marriage, it includes narratives addressing the problems caused when children marry foreigners against the wishes of their parents. In light of this it may appear surprising that the narrator in Gen 2:24 offers no evaluation of the phenomenon he reports. There is no statement to the effect that inter-marriage is a good, bad, or indifferent thing – merely an implied observation that Yahweh's creation of the *ishshah* is the reason for a pattern of men choosing foreign partners for themselves against their parents' wishes. In other words, the choosing of 'inappropriate' partners is a direct result of God's actions in creation! According to Gen 2:24, a propensity of Israelite men to choose women other than the women chosen for them by their parents is, far from being something objectionable to God, something that flows as the natural consequence of the manner in which God created men and women.<sup>34</sup>

### **Gen 2:24 and the marriage debates**

What are the consequences of our reading of Gen 2:24 for readers interested in debates concerning same-sex marriage? Is there good news to be found here for gay and lesbian people? The answer to this latter question must be 'yes', but arriving at this conclusion requires the drawing out of some implications of the discussion so far.

First, those who support traditional readings of Genesis 2 generally interpret Gen 2:24 as supportive and even prescriptive of the status quo. Gen 2:24, it is argued, establishes a normative understanding of marriage as heterosexual that excludes the possibility of marriage between any configuration of persons other than one man and

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<sup>33</sup> Conversely, while Abraham is enjoined to leave his father's house in Gen 12:1 the context is not marriage, but God's choice (or election) of Abraham.

<sup>34</sup> At the historical level, what is likely to be at issue here is two competing understandings of holiness, as Brett has recently argued in 'Politics of Marriage in Genesis' in *Making a Difference: Essays on the Bible and Judaism in Honor of Tamara Cohn Eskenazi*, David J A Clines, Kent Harold Richards and Jacob L Wright, eds (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012) 49-59.

one woman. This sort of reading underlies the opinion of Archbishop Sentamu that the definition of marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution is “set in tradition and history.”

It is ironic, then, that our reading of Gen 2:24, as a descriptive (not prescriptive) etiology of the phenomenon of inter-marriage, presents the verse as counter-cultural by nature! Gen 2:24 suggests that in marrying outside their own ethnic group, Israelite men step outside the accepted order, at least as that order is understood by their parents. The implication is that the attraction between men and women is so strong that some men are compelled to disregard their obligation to honour their parents for the sake of marriage to the companion of their choice. In one sense, this suggestion is unexceptional – as we’ve seen, the Old Testament includes many narratives in which Israelite men take foreign wives to the consternation of their parents or of other figures of authority. However, in those other texts marriages between Israelites and foreigners are generally presented as problematic. The radical thing about Gen 2:24 is that it observes the phenomenon of male-female attraction leading to inter-marriage and – far from condemning it – demonstrates that the phenomenon is the direct result of God’s actions in creation. The attraction itself is presented as a compulsion within males and females to be re-unified – to re-capture the unification known in the earth creature (*adam*) prior to God’s introduction of gender through the creation of woman (*ishshah*) from the rib of man (*ish*): “*Therefore a man abandons/forsakes his father and his mother and clings to his woman and they become one flesh.*”

The first element of good news for lesbian and gay readers, then, is that Gen 2:24 is best understood not as a prescriptive text, mandating a particular model of marriage and excluding others, but rather as a radical text that identifies a phenomenon generally understood to be problematic and attributes it to God.

The second implication builds on the first. Although, *when read in the context of Gen 2:18-25*, Gen 2:24 is apparently concerned with the complementarity of gender (in the context of the need for companionship), Gen 2:24 *itself* is more likely to be focused on matters of ethnicity than of gender. This insight permits, and might even encourage, exploration of parallels between the phenomena of inter-marriage and same-sex unions.

Like the Israelite men contemplated by Gen 2:24, today's lesbian and gay women and men choose partners (often) against the established preferences of parents, society and religious communities. Those established preferences are grounded (often) upon an understanding of God's will for all humanity as expressed in scripture. As we've seen, the books of the Old Testament contain provisions that expressly prohibit Israelites from marrying foreigners *and* from lying "with a man as with a woman." (Lev 18:22; 20:13)

Gen 2:24 doesn't say that Israelite parents are misguided in their preference for Israelite partners for their children. Certainly, there are a number of different scriptural traditions about marriages between Israelites and foreigners. But Gen 2:24 *does say* that a choice of marriage partner, even if apparently contrary to parental wishes and scriptural injunctions, *may nevertheless be the natural consequence of God's actions in creation.*

For lesbian and gay women and men, then, Gen 2:24 need not be feared as scripture that excludes and discriminates. It is not a definition of marriage, to the exclusion of all other definitions. On the contrary, the better understanding of Gen 2:24 is as scripture that observes a plurality of models of love and marriage and that recognises in each a genuine expression of God's creative work.

If we are right in this conclusion, then a key question arises - whether it is the nature of marriage or merely an interpretation of Gen 2:24 that is "set in history and tradition"? Our discussion shows Gen 2:24 itself to be scripture that refuses to be bound by the strictures of history and tradition.<sup>35</sup> On what grounds would we follow suit, perhaps proposing a fresh account of holiness?

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<sup>35</sup> Even Jesus' use of Gen 2:24, as witnessed in Mk 10:6-9 and Matt 19:4-6, can be understood as radical. Jesus' teaching on divorce, set out there, cites Gen 2:24 in the context of implementing an ethic more rigorous than that of Jesus' own day in which divorce was permitted by Deut 24:1. See Richard A Burrige, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 56, 174-75, 213.