

## **“Spiritual Adultery” From God’s Prophet Jeremiah**

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The New Testament describes the Church of Jesus Christ as His bride; the church is the Lamb’s wife (Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17). The glorification of the Church in heaven at the last day is described as a marriage; the apostle John speaks of “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:6-9).

Using the same imagery of marriage, the Scriptures describe those who teach or practice false doctrine, false worship, and false religion as harlots, prostitutes, and spiritual adulterers and adulteresses. For example, in the New Testament, James declares: “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4).

So also in the Old Testament, especially among the Prophets, the motif of spiritual adultery is frequently repeated. It is a common theme, for example, in Hosea’s prophecy, in which the Lord introduces the prophet Hosea with a very unusual commissioning: “*When* the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea: “Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry And children of harlotry, For the land has committed great harlotry *By departing* from the LORD.” So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son” (Hos. 1:2-3).

In the prophecy of Jeremiah we find the same recurring theme of spiritual adultery. God had from the beginning united the Church to Himself, as it were, by a marriage-bond; and the people, as it is well known, had been so received into covenant, that there was contracted, as it were, a spiritual marriage (Jer. 51:5).<sup>1</sup> Yet, sadly the people who professed God’s name had gone astray and broken their marital vows.

Jeremiah teaches us that the Jews of his day were like harlots, who, having cast off all shame, run here and there, not only because they burn with insane lust but also because they are carried away by their own greed for dishonest gain.<sup>2</sup> In effect, the Lord said of the Jews: “When I redeemed you from your enemies, I did not give you permission to thus prostitute yourself without any restraint, without any shame; for I planted you as a choice vine” (Jer. 2:21).<sup>3</sup>

Both parties were connected together as by a sacred bond, as the case is between a husband and his wife; as he pledges his faith to her, so she by the law of marriage is bound to him. The people were like the basest prostitute, for they would not hear the voice of their husband, though he was willing and anxious to be reconciled to them. Now, a wife must be completely irreclaimable when she spurns her own husband, who is ready to receive her into favor and to forgive her for all the wickedness she may have done. The Prophet then shows that there was in the people so great and so hopeless

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. V, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 200.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. I, 111.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. I, 111.

an impiety that they closed their ears against God who kindly exhorted them to repent; and worse still, they shamelessly boasted that they were resolved to worship idols and their own fictions and to reject the only true God (Jer. 2:25).<sup>4</sup>

The Prophet Jeremiah compares the Jews to lascivious women, who not only despise their husbands at home, but ramble here and there in all directions, and also paint their faces and seek for themselves all the charms of wantonness [unchastity/promiscuity]. In effect, God asks, “Why do you disguise and paint yourselves like prostitutes who use many strategies to allure young men and to inflame their lusts? Why do you undertake so much labor to gain a meretricious [shameless/unchaste] hire?” We shall hereafter see why he says this; for he upbraids them for applying to the Assyrians and the Egyptians for friendship and assistance (Jer. 2:33).<sup>5</sup>

It was a common thing for the Prophets to compare the people to lovers; for the Jews, while they ought to have been firmly attached to God (like a chaste woman, who does not turn her eyes here and there, nor wander about, but respects her husband alone) thought to seek safety now from the Assyrians, then from the Egyptians. This sinful disposition is then what the Prophet here condemns; and hence he speaks of them metaphorically as of an adulterous woman, who despises her husband and rambles after any man she can find, and seeks wanton [unchaste] and silly young men in all places, and subjects herself to the gratification of all.<sup>6</sup>

As a husband is content with the beauty of his wife, and seeks no additional and sophisticated elegancies; so God required nothing from that people except fidelity, like a husband, who requires chastity in his wife. The meaning then is, “As a wife, really attached to her husband, has no need to undergo much labor, for she knows that her own native beauty pleases him, nor does she labor much to gain the heart of her husband, for the best recommendation is her chastity; so you might have lived without any trouble by only serving Me and keeping My law; but now what is your chastity? You are like unchaste women who labor to gain the hearts of adulterers; for as they burn with lust, so there is no end nor limits to their attempts to seek embellishments; and they torment themselves, only that they might attach adulterers to themselves. Such then are you (says God) for you spend much care and labor in seeking for yourselves strange [foreign] lovers.”<sup>7</sup>

God declares that the Jews were worse than the Assyrians and the Egyptians, as a lascivious woman is far worse than all the adulterers whom she captivates as her lovers. For when a young man is not deceived, as the devil does not apply the fuel, he may continue chaste and pure; but when an impudent and unchaste woman entices him, it is all over with him. The Prophet then says, that the Assyrians and the Egyptians were innocent when compared with his own nation. How so? “Because they have been led astray,” he says, “by your allurements, like young men, who are destroyed by the fallacious ornaments of prostitutes; for it is the same as though they had fallen into snares; the evil then has proceeded from you, and the fault lies with you” (Jer. 2:34).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Vol. I., 124.

<sup>5</sup> Vol. I., 139.

<sup>6</sup> Vol. I., 140.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. I., 140.

<sup>8</sup> Vol. I., 141.

It ought to be deemed monstrous when a woman is inflamed with lust at the sight of any one. And yet this lewdness is what the Prophet reprobates in the Jews when he says that they ran here and there to change their ways; so that their love never continued, but they lusted after any they met with; no, they even went here and there to allure them (Jer. 2:36).<sup>9</sup>

We hence see that the Prophet did not exceed due limits when he spoke against the Jews with so much displeasure and condemned them in such reproachful terms; for they had transferred the glory due to God to the Egyptians, when they considered them to be the authors of their safety; and they had thus despised the promises of God, so that there was no attention given to prayer. It ought to be carefully observed that whatever we resolve to do that is not approved by God cannot possibly succeed, for God will subvert all our hopes.<sup>10</sup>

Hence whenever the people departed from the pure worship of God, they were justly said to have played the harlot, for they violated their pledged faith. Just as simplicity of faith is spiritual chastity, so also apostasy is that shamelessness and betrayal, when a wife becomes unfaithful to her husband by following adulterers.<sup>11</sup> In other words, a person who possesses simple faith in Christ alone and in His Word alone evidences spiritual chastity; but a person who seeks to mix Christ with idols, to mix pure doctrine and worship with false doctrine and worship, to mix God's all-sufficient Word with the traditions and commandments of men, to mix God's wisdom found in Scripture with the world's wisdom, that person is guilty of spiritual adultery and apostasy.

The Prophet Jeremiah refers to the spiritual marriage which God had formed with the people of Israel; for a kind of adultery was committed, when they sought foreign alliances; as they thus denied God, being not satisfied with His protection. As a wife considers herself sufficiently protected by her husband, so the Israelites ought to have depended on God only; but inasmuch as they ran here and there, following their own vagrant desires, the Prophet justly compares them to adulterous women (Jer. 4:30).<sup>12</sup>

It is a mark of great shamelessness when many adulterers or unchaste men assemble in one house; for most adulterers are ashamed of their adulteries so that they endeavor to hide their baseness, but when men come together in troops, as though under an uplifted banner, it is a proof that there is no shame, but that they thus disregard all decency, like brute beasts. The most suitable meaning then is, that they are said to have assembled together in brothels [houses of prostitution], because they gloried in their own superstitions and sacrileges (Jer. 5:7).<sup>13</sup>

Adultery is used by the prophets as a metaphor for idolatry. When the prophet Jeremiah spoke of adultery, he usually did not refer to whoredom, which yet prevailed greatly among the people, but he only condemns them for having fallen away into ungodly and false forms of worship, which is spiritual adultery (Jer. 13:27).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Vol. I., 148.

<sup>10</sup> Vol. I., 150-151.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. I., 169.

<sup>12</sup> Vol. I., 248.

<sup>13</sup> Vol. I., 271.

<sup>14</sup> Vol. I., 198.

The Jews in Jeremiah's day said that they intended to worship God, while they accumulated rites which were not prescribed in the law. The Prophet therefore condemns them here as being within full of unchastity. He said in effect, "you are like an unchaste woman, who thinks of nothing but of her filthy lovers, and goes after her adulterers; you are thus entirely given up to your whoredoms" (Jer. 13:27).<sup>15</sup>

The Bible clearly condemns the sin of adultery (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18; Rom. 2:22; 13:9; Gal. 5:19; Jas. 2:11). Yet, what is the greater sin—adultery against one's spouse or adultery against God (cf. 2 Pet. 2:14; Rev. 2:22)? Spiritual adultery is committed not just against a mortal created in the image and likeness of God but against the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable God Himself. How grievous and heinous a crime spiritual adultery is!

May all God's people carefully seek to adhere diligently to their spiritual marriage vows, as we keep God's commandments, maintain His pure worship, and cling to Christ alone and the purity and simplicity of the whole counsel of God, which has been revealed to us in God's word alone.

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<sup>15</sup> Vol. I, 199.