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The Annunciation

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the Hebrew Scriptures. In Chapter 62 of Isaiah, Jerusalem is compared to a bride: “For the Lord delights in you, and makes your land his spouse... And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride, so shall your God rejoice in you” (Isaiah 62: 4b, 5b). The prophet Jeremiah reports that the Lord lamented that “I remember the devotion of your youth, how you loved me as a bride...” (Jeremiah 2:2b). The book of Hosea tells the story of its eponymous protagonist, who is ordered by God to marry an unfaithful wife (1:2). Hosea 3:1 makes the analogy explicit: “Give your love to a woman beloved of a paramour, an adulteress: Even as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods...” The imagery used in Hosea is vivid, as the Lord describes how he plans to woo his beloved, “speak to her heart” (2:17) and make a new covenant on that day (2:20). While his wife is unfaithful, there is no hint of responsibility or blame for Hosea (or, by analogy, the Lord). Strangely, Hosea/the Lord has no reason to love an unfaithful lover as fiercely as he does; even repeated indiscretions cause him to love his unfaithful wife all the more. This imagery conveys the great and reckless love of God for his sinful people. The use of the image of the unfaithful wife not only provides indictment, but also a model to follow.

This image of God marrying a people became prevalent in late Judaism, so much so that the Song of Songs was included in the canon of scripture based on what was seen as its allegorical presentation of the love between God and the people of God.⁷ The text contains ample praise of the physical beauty of each of the young lovers, and the woman (the people of God) hears her lover calling to her: “Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one, and come!” This imagery remained popular far beyond the original time and place; scholars believe that this book was the most read and commented upon in medieval cloisters.⁸ This text was seen to speak to the highest levels of divine reality, revealing the highest truths, because it was so abstract. Many saw it not only as an allegory for Christ and his church, but also for God uniting with the human soul.⁹ But for many of the Jewish people, this kind of language implied future events. As the Jewish people looked towards a future Messiah, the present age was regarded as a betrothal. When the Messiah came, then would the wedding of Israel and God be celebrated.¹⁰

For Christians, this Messiah is Jesus Christ. As might be expected, then, the gospel accounts function as a consummation of this promise; while wedding imagery is still used, it is Jesus Christ who becomes the bridegroom (and not God the Father) to the Christian community.¹¹ The parable in Mat-



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⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸ Beth Kreitzer, “Menno Simons and the Bride of Christ,” *Mennonite Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1996): 299.

⁹ Ibid., 300.

¹⁰ Preston, 80.

¹¹ Ibid., 80.