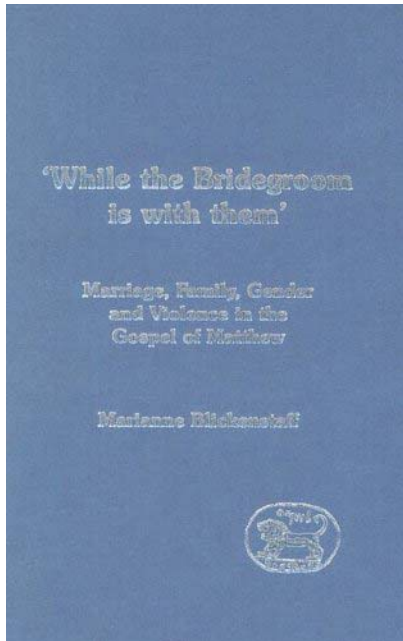


RBL 10/2006



Blickenstaff, Marianne

'While the Bridegroom Is with Them': Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew

Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 292

London: T&T Clark, 2005. Pp. vi + 244. Hardcover.
\$120.00. ISBN 0567041123.

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While a number of studies in recent decades have given attention to marriage and family or gender or violence in the Gospel of Matthew, none has combined these categories of analysis as Marianne Blickenstaff does in her recent publication *'While the Bridegroom Is With Them': Marriage, Family, Gender and Violence in the Gospel of Matthew*. She has also chosen to focus her study through the lens of the bridegroom, providing scholars with a new and careful analysis of that lens also. In her well-documented introduction, she lays out the lacuna in Matthean studies in relation to her combination of themes, which she seeks to fill with this study, a goal she has achieved convincingly.

In chapter 1 Blickenstaff lays the foundation of her analysis by providing a careful study of extrabiblical and biblical texts that yield up the unexpected insight that the literary figure of the bridegroom is often associated with violence as well as the expected values associated with the wedding feast. The bridegrooms of Lot's daughters die violently in the conflagration of Sodom, an image of destruction cited twice by Matthew. The daughters' initiative in relation to pregnancy on the loss of their bridegrooms is seen to anticipate the women of Matthew's genealogy, who participate in what can be seen as irregular unions. A similar pattern continues as Blickenstaff reads the tradition of Moses as the

bridegroom of blood, Samson, the Levite from Ephraim (“one of the Bible’s most gruesome stories”), David, Tobiah and the unnamed son-in-law of Sanballat, and the deity as bridegroom or husband. Cumulatively, the reader gains insight into the patterns of violence that emerge in the Matthean Gospel narrative around the theme of the bridegroom. This is further augmented by a brief survey of this trope in Greco-Roman contexts and in Roman society by way of the story of the rape of the Sabine women. Context and text have permeated the Matthean narrative, this chapter demonstrates, so that the Matthean bridegroom is significantly associated with violence, an insight that Blickenstaff cites as opening the space for her feminist resistance to the bridegroom and wedding images. Explorations of context and intertext are not limited, however, to this chapter but continue to inform the study throughout, providing readers with a wealth of interpretive material; however, one must read the footnotes carefully to partake of this rich fare.

A brief introduction to the wedding parables between chapters 1 and 2 lays the ground for the resistant reading that characterizes this study. Here Blickenstaff locates not only the bridegroom Jesus of the Matthean narrative but also the Matthean community liminally as described by Victor Turner. This Turnerian lens is combined with Brigitta Kahl’s “hermeneutic of conspiracy” to provide a way to read Matthew against Matthew, particularly in the wedding parables.

Chapters 2 and 3 form the kernel of this work and focus attention on the parable of the Wedding Feast (Matt 22:1–14) and the parable of the Ten Virgins (25:1–13). Allegorical interpretations that link the king who invites to the wedding feast with God are resisted in a way that opens up alternative ways of reading the slaves and the garmentless man in relation to the kingdom of heaven. The interpretive steps move skillfully between the now-familiar allegorical or even literal interpretations to alternatives that identify the silence of the garmentless man with the silence of Jesus—both resisting illegitimately exercised political power for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, Blickenstaff draws the conclusion that the parable critiques such power in favor of the expelled one, whom she suggests might be in right relationship with the Jesus community’s ideal of the kingdom of heaven. This is a carefully argued conclusion, and the reader of this work must be prepared to follow attentively through the constant shifts from the dominant allegorical reading to a new resistant reading in relation to each section of the parable. It is the dance of this nuanced interpretation that draws Blickenstaff’s readers into sharing her conclusions.

The parable of the Ten Virgins interpreted allegorically has likewise associated violent conflict and rejection with the theme of the bridegroom and hence is read resistantly in chapter 3. As in the previous chapter, it is the resistance to the allegorical interpretation of

this parable that equates the wedding feast with the kingdom of heaven that opens up new possibilities of interpretation. Examining ways in which the parable as traditionally interpreted contradicts other Gospel teachings allows Blickenstaff to conclude that the bridegroom may not represent Jesus and that all ten virgins may be antitypes of discipleship. While such resistant reading is both careful and convincing, Blickenstaff may have been able to strengthen her reading through further exploration of the subversive function of parables and the location of the points of subversion in the parable. Perhaps her study will open up such an avenue for subsequent scholars.

A fourth chapter turns the readers' attention to a study of the violence associated with the Matthean Gospel's portrayal of Jesus as a bridegroom establishing a fictive family. Here the reader encounters again the liminal lens directed toward the text to reveal that the model of household in the Gospel is founded on that of the first century but that this is both overturned and replaced by the narrative construction of a new model of fictive kinship for those belonging to the kingdom of heaven. Against the backdrop of the first-century family, Blickenstaff examines the voluntary association in a variety of forms as informing the fictive family constructed in the Matthean Gospel and the violence associated with such construction. Here gender is given specific attention in relation to the members of the new fictive family, and Jesus as bridegroom is shown to disrupt key social and cultural understandings of marriage, sexuality, and family. The concluding consideration of the violence meted out on the innocent children of Bethlehem stands as a symbol of the violence that characterizes the fictive family in the Matthean Gospel before which Blickenstaff seems to be able to find little resistance.

The very metaphor of the bridegroom is subverted by the absence of a bride and hence of the bridegroom's participation in procreation. It is to this that Blickenstaff gives attention in chapter 5 as she examines the Matthean teachings on marriage and divorce, concluding that, within the world created by the Gospel narrative, marriage belongs to the present world but the resurrection ideal is absence of marriage. Jesus, the celibate bridegroom, therefore, represents that ideal.

Readers will find Blickenstaff's analysis of the Matthean Gospel to be a very sobering one that does not flinch from the violence in the text, especially as this is associated with the theme of the bridegroom. She demonstrates how a reading in dialogue with certain teachings of Jesus can resist some of the violence but that association with the kingdom that Jesus proclaims may mean experiencing human violence oneself. Her study is a significant one for all biblical scholars in a world characterized by violence, challenging us not to support such violence by our uncritical interpretations of the biblical text.