

**LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER:
A Biblical Study of Divorce**

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PREFACE

They shall be one flesh.

Five times in the Bible the Spirit of God uses these words to emphasize the permanence of the marriage bond. The strength of their union offers man and wife great joy. But it also threatens unspeakable pain, if so deep a bond should be torn apart. Here, as so often in our lives, we need the hope brought by patience and comfort of the Scriptures (Rom. 15:4).

Today there is hardly anyone who does not know the pain of divorce — if not personally, then in the lives of friends and family. For over ten years I have been studying the biblical texts that concern divorce, in an effort to soothe my own perplexity with heaven's perspective on the subject. At first, I did not imagine that a book would be necessary. Surely, I thought, these texts have been worked over and over, and the answers made available in countless pamphlets, sermons, and articles.

I found abundant published opinions on divorce. Some writers, like Murray 1961 and Adams 1980, hold a thinly-disguised brief for their church's creed. Others, like Wenham 1979, offer brilliant insights on isolated passages, but do not integrate their observations with other biblical data. Still others, like Heth 1982, provide helpful summaries of the conclusions of earlier scholars.

A number of striking insights emerged from my study of the biblical texts, insights that other authors seem to have missed. When I shared these with Christian friends, they found them helpful, and urged me to share them with a wider public.

The flavor of this book reflects these origins.

- It is an attempt to give exegetical help with a practical problem. Thus it is addressed primarily to people with responsibility for ministry. They will welcome its emphasis on application, and not be put off by some degree of detail in exegetical argument.
- I find that for people who do not know the various scholarly views on an issue, long refutations of those with whom I disagree tend to confuse and not to clarify. So I strive for an informal style, presenting my conclusions and the reasons for them as simply and as positively as I can. To make the book useful to readers with broader exposure, I append to several chapters notes dealing with technical questions, but these are highly selective and do not pretend to be an encyclopedic response to every position that has been advocated through the centuries.
- The book is exegetical, not experiential. You will search in vain for case studies. There are plenty of those available among your friends and acquaintances, if you have the compassion to reach out and help. The existing literature is weak exegetically, and it is this gap that I seek to fill by concentrating on analysis of the text.
- I accept the Bible as the Word of the one God, who cannot deny himself. There is clearly a progression as one moves through the history of revelation, and God has been pleased to impose varying economies on his people in different ages. Still, we are not through studying any one passage until we understand how it fits together with the other biblical texts on the

same subject. Thus the book treats every biblical text that I feel might shed light on the question, including some that are not usually considered in discussions of divorce.

- The central focus of my study has been the text itself, not the opinions and comments of others about the text. As a result, references appear only in the technical notes, and there only selectively. Where I knowingly repeat the conclusions of others, I give appropriate credit, but I do not guarantee that all the other conclusions are original with me. They are, however, unfamiliar among evangelical believers today, and I am more concerned to publicize them than to trace their history.
- The study has been based on published Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, not only on translations. Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations in the book are my own rendering, based on *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* in the Old Testament and Hodges and Farstad 1982 in the New. Textual variants do not affect the main conclusions reached, and readers who prefer other editions should find the arguments unaffected. My translations frequently emphasize specific exegetical points, and should not be viewed as competing with standard translations of the Bible. In fact, readers may find my points clearer if they compare my renderings with more traditional versions.

The book has three parts.

1. Several introductory chapters survey the entire study and lay a foundation by examining the biblical concept of marriage.
2. The central portion of the book examines the main texts that bear on the question of divorce, one by one, in their historical order.
3. A final section examines some practical questions that may arise.

The studies that led to this book began in the 1970's. Many friends offered helpful comments on portions of the book or on lectures based on it. Mrs. Francis Quek (Leelian) converted the book from the original PC Outline files into Microsoft Word. I am particularly indebted to Cyril Hocking, Brian Sietsema, and my wife Anita for their careful reading and comments on the entire work. Mrs. Alan Armstrong (Kathi) gave useful comments, and suggested and pursued possible publishers. My immediate family, including my son Gene, my wife, and her mother Isabella Nowlin, inspired this work and urged it on, though it often supplanted their personal interests. To them I offer my special thanks.

Ann Arbor, MI

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**PART I:
INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW**

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CHAPTER 1

PLEASE READ THIS CHAPTER

If you have opened this book with a particular problem in mind, you may be tempted to skip the first few chapters and move right into the meat.

Please let the rest wait until you have read this chapter. It outlines the philosophy behind the rest of the book. You'll be much better able to make use of the detailed studies that follow once you understand the method that lies behind them.

Some people are very theoretical about their faith. They emphasize technicalities of Bible study, but it doesn't seem to have much effect on their lives. Others take a practical approach to Christian living, and are impatient with detailed explanations of how we know what the Bible really means.

This chapter explains why neither of these positions is adequate. We

- describe the problem of keeping both doctrine and practice in focus;
- study Paul's solution to the problem; and
- outline how Paul's pattern affects this book.

1.1 The Problem of Doctrine and Practice

You are interested in an intensely practical subject, the subject of divorce. Perhaps you are suffering in a strained marriage, and are looking for a way out. You may have loved ones with family problems, and you want to be able to help them. You may have pastoral responsibilities for a group of Christians, and need biblical answers to their questions about divorce and remarriage. Even if you are only curious about these topics, it is probable that someone close to you is divorced or is contemplating divorce.

Divorce, though, is only part of your interest. You are also interested in the Bible. You believe that the Bible is relevant to how we live, and you want to bring that relevance to bear on family problems.

What is the relation between the Scriptures and daily conduct? How can the study of an ancient book guide twentieth-century decisions about divorce and remarriage?

The task of merging theology and practice is a little like making salad dressing from oil and vinegar. Oil and vinegar tend to separate from one another, even when they are in the same container. Constant effort is needed to keep them mixed. It's not enough for the chef to shake the bottle and place it on the table. Every diner must shake it, too, or else be satisfied with pure oil or straight vinegar.

Keeping doctrine and practice in step with one another also requires constant effort. It is easy to slip into an abstract exposition of theology that ignores daily life. It is also easy to live our lives by intuition and emotion, doing whatever seems practical at the moment, without asking what the Bible says. These extremes are like unmixed salad dressing. Fortunately, the Bible itself instructs us how to keep doctrine and action well mixed.

1.2 Paul's Solution to the Problem

Paul's words to Timothy in 2 Tim. 3:16-17 suggest a framework for applying the Scriptures to practical life.

*Every Scripture
is given by inspiration of God, and
is profitable
for doctrine,
for reproof,
for correction,
for discipline in righteousness,

that the man of God might be
complete,
thoroughly equipped
for every good work.*

This passage sets forth the *source* of the Scriptures, the *goal* for which God gave them, and the *means* of applying them to reach that goal.

1.2.1 The Source of the Scriptures

Paul describes the Scriptures as "given by inspiration of God." It issues forth from God as does breath from a person. His Spirit carries along the writers:

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke, being borne along by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21).

Behind the many diverse human authors of the Bible there is one ultimate source, God. He is its author in a way that he is not the author of other books.

This confession has some practical implications for us.

- Though many people had a hand in producing the Bible, it still makes sense for us to say, "God says ..."
- When we first read some portions of the Bible, they seem to clash with one another. Because God is the author of them all, we cannot explain contrasting passages as reflecting disagreements among their writers. Instead, we continue to study them, comparing them with one another and with other passages, until we can understand them in harmony with one another. God is not the author of confusion. The best interpretation is the interpretation that fits all the texts.
- The Bible is not just a collection of interesting anecdotes about people's experience. It is God's revelation, stating the desires of our Creator and Lord. He expects us to follow it, and we will have to explain ourselves to him if we do not.

1.2.2 The Goal of the Scriptures

The ultimate purpose of the Bible is

that the man of God might be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The phrase "thoroughly equipped" translates a verb that Greek writers use to describe an oil press accompanied with its accessories, or a rowboat with its oars. The Bible is the one essential implement that the man of God needs to do his work. It is practical, not just theoretical. It tells us not only what to believe, but how to live. It enables us to become master craftsmen in the workshop of life.

1.2.3 The Means of Reaching the Goal

Paul begins with inspired Scriptures, and ends with people equipped for daily life. Here are the oil and vinegar that we want to mix. Paul gives us a four-step recipe at the end of verse 16:

*Every Scripture ... is profitable
for doctrine,
for reproof,
for correction,
for discipline in righteousness.*

The first step in applying the Scriptures to life is **doctrine**, or teaching. Teaching is the systematic presentation of biblical concepts, either in speech or in writing, by specially gifted people whom God has given to the church.

After doctrine, and as a result of it, comes **reproof**. We are reproofed when we see something in our lives that is not as it should be. Reproof is pointing out a problem, revealing a flaw, shining a light on a blemish that has been hidden.

Discovering deficiencies is only the beginning. The Bible also helps us to **correct** them. It shows us how to avoid our errors, and gives positive steps we can take against them.

Finally, the Bible is profitable for **discipline in righteousness**. The word "discipline" implies repetitive training. We need to hear the Bible's lessons over and over to strengthen patterns of behavior that will avoid the sins of the past. It is usually not enough for us to hear a truth once. We need repetition, and often from different sources, to set the lesson firmly in place. Thus Paul can send his most theological letter to a church that is already "filled with all knowledge" (Rom. 15:14), because he knows the need to "remind" them (Rom. 15:15).

Paul confirms the practical orientation of the Scriptures in his exhortation to Timothy in the next chapter:

I charge you therefore before God ...: Preach the word. Be ready in season, out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1,2).

This exhortation offers close parallels to the four benefits of the Scriptures described in 3:16.

First, because the Scriptures are profitable for systematic study and exposition, Timothy should preach them in this way.

<i>Every Scripture ... is profitable for DOCTRINE (3:16).</i>	<i>Preach the word. ... with all ... DOCTRINE (4:2).</i>
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The Scriptures are effective as a searchlight, to point out people's sin. Timothy should shine this light where there are problems, rather than dimming it to make people comfortable.

<i>Every Scripture ... is profitable ... for REPROOF (3:16).</i>	<i>Preach the word. ... REPROVE, REBUKE ... (4:2).</i>
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In exhorting people, Timothy offers practical instruction and encouragement for correcting the errors that reproof has disclosed.

<i>Every Scripture ... is profitable f... for CORRECTION (3:16).</i>	<i>Preach the word. ... EXHORT (4:2).</i>
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People need to hear the Scriptures over and over as the Spirit disciplines or trains them in godly living. The one who preaches those Scriptures should be constantly standing by, ready to help with this training. Timothy needs longsuffering for this work, because training involves repetition, and the results may be slow to appear.

<i>Every Scripture ... is profitable ... for DISCIPLINE in righteousness (3:16).</i>	<i>Preach the word. ... Be ready IN SEASON, OUT OF SEASON, ... with ALL LONGSUFFERING ... (4:2).</i>
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A skilled craftsman knows his tools and works with them, rather than against them. Timothy is like a craftsman, and the Bible is his tool. God has designed the Bible for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training. Thus Timothy's ministry should be marked by a doctrinal foundation, willingness to identify sin and show how to correct it, and patience in the process of discipline.

1.3 Paul's Pattern and This Book

The rest of this book reflects in several ways the blueprint for applying the Scriptures that Paul gives Timothy.

Paul moves from doctrine to practice, rather than the other way around. Family problems are intensely practical, and tend to overwhelm the emotions of those who must confront them. It is tempting to organize the discussion topically, around case studies of typical family problems. This approach runs the risk of losing sight of biblical precepts in a storm of practical concerns. Instead, we expound, one at a time, several biblical texts that discuss divorce and remarriage. Our first task is to understand these texts and their relationship to one another.

Doctrine is not enough by itself. It must lead to reproof and correction. So our study must be pastoral as well as academic. We will keep in mind some questions that arise in modern families, and point out where the biblical text leads to answers. Some of these answers touch on personal issues, and may lead to emotional pain. We dare not let the fear of pain turn us away from considering such conclusions. A greater danger is that, for fear of conflict, we will stop at doctrine and neglect reproof and correction. If we do stop before discussing practical implications, we short-circuit the work of the Scriptures in our lives.

The cycle of applying the Bible to life concludes with "discipline in righteousness." It is seldom enough to say something once. We will repeat some themes often in the pages ahead, from several different standpoints. Each time we reconsider a principle, with God's help we will understand it a little better and become a little more skillful in following it in daily life.

CHAPTER 2 A PEEK AT COMING CONCLUSIONS

We seek an integrated understanding of the biblical divorce texts, not just a collection of individual observations. This global perspective comes from keeping all of the passages in mind as we study each one in detail. You could read the book through twice, once to get a general idea of what each text teaches and a second time to integrate that general context with the details of each study. Instead, to save you time, this chapter summarizes the conclusions that subsequent chapters will develop more rigorously. It raises the issues that the rest of the book addresses, and lets you peek at the answers we will find.

It is easy to misunderstand a chapter like this one. I am not setting out assumptions on which the rest of the study rests, or declaring a preconceived creed that the later chapters defend. The principles outlined here are the conclusions of the study, not its foundation. Logically, this is the last chapter of the book. It comes first because I want you to understand the later discussions, and surprise hinders understanding. If you know what is coming, you will be able to understand it better when it arrives.

Our summary follows the structure of the rest of the book.

- The chapter after this one is the last chapter of Part I, the Introduction of the book. It seeks a definition of marriage, so that we can know which couples "God has joined together."
- The nine chapters in Part II study the biblical texts on divorce and remarriage. We treat them in the order in which they were written, so that we can trace God's unfolding revelation on the subject.
- The last five chapters, in Part III, discuss some practical topics on the basis of the conclusions drawn in Part II from the texts.

2.1 What is a Marriage?

The big question in this book is, "What does the Bible say about divorce and remarriage?" We can handle this question more easily if we break it down into smaller questions. We could ask, "What does the Bible say about divorce?" Even this may be too ambitious. We might want to start with a question of definition: "What is a divorce?"

The last question seems easy. Divorce is a legal action dissolving the marriage of two people. This leads us to a more basic question. Two people cannot be divorced without first being married. So it is natural to ask, "What is marriage?" We discuss this question briefly here, and in more detail in the next chapter.

Even this simple question has answers at several levels.

- People sometimes consider themselves married to one another just by living together, whether the state recognizes their union or not.
- The state, in turn, declares people to be married or not, usually without asking what God thinks of the matter.
- The Lord Jesus taught that there is a level of marriage that God recognizes, and even ratifies:

What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder (Matt. 19:6).

Since we want to know God's will about divorce and remarriage, we need a definition of the third level of marriage. Our question becomes, "When are two people joined together by God?" To answer this question, we will study several examples of marriage in the Bible, and ask what characteristics they share.

The Bible regards marriage as the only legitimate context for physical union between man and woman. Physical union, though, is not enough to make a couple man and wife before God. The Lord Jesus makes this clear to the woman at the well of Sychar when he tells her that the man with whom she is presently living is not her husband (John 4:18). In the next chapter, we will see that at least three things are true of unions that the Bible recognizes as marriage.

- The man and woman enter into a covenant or commitment to one another.
- They make this commitment in keeping with the standards of their society and culture.
- They unite physically.

These elements form the weakest bond that God ratifies as marriage. They do not guarantee that the marriage is pleasing to God. A marriage may meet these conditions and still violate the standards of God's word. For instance, a believer sins if she knowingly marries an unbeliever. If that union meets these three conditions, though, God has joined them together. If the man and woman seek to dissolve that marriage, the biblical teaching on divorce applies to them.

Though physical union is not the only element of marriage, it is an important one, and we will refer to it frequently. In discussing unlawful union, we will use the terms "fornication" and "adultery" in keeping with their biblical usage. "Adultery" describes a union in which at least one partner belongs to someone else. It always involves unfaithfulness to marriage. "Fornication" describes any unlawful union, whether or not the participants are being unfaithful to their spouses. Every case of adultery is a case of fornication, but some cases of fornication (such as premarital union between single people) are not cases of adultery.

The definition of marriage that we have outlined has important practical consequences.

- Premarital union does not turn into marriage if a couple persists in it for a long time, even if they are committed to each other. They are members of society. One of the functions that God has given society is to recognize and regulate the union of man and wife. Christians are to be subject to the civil authorities (Rom. 13), and so should follow their rules for marriage.
- Not every separation of a man and a woman living together is divorce. Divorce is the breakup of a marriage, and is forbidden throughout the Scriptures. A union that is not marriage, on the other hand, should be dissolved.
- Paul teaches in Rom. 7:3 that a woman who remarries while her first husband is alive commits adultery. If physical union alone were marriage, a Christian whose past life includes fornication could never marry anyone else without committing adultery against the first partner. Because physical union alone is not marriage, it does not make a future marriage adulterous. A Christian who has repented of previous fornication and forsaken it, and who has not married a person still living, may marry without committing adultery.

2.2 Bible Passages about Divorce and Remarriage

After we substantiate our definition of marriage in the next chapter, we will work through passages in five major bodies of revelation that bear on the question of divorce and remarriage. The five portions of the Bible that we will study in Part II are

- the Mosaic Law;
- the Prophets, represented by Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah;
- Ezra in the period after the Babylonian captivity;
- the teaching of the Lord Jesus;
- and Paul's instruction.

2.2.1 Does Moses approve divorce?

Chapters 6 through 8 analyze passages from the Law of Moses that regulate divorce and remarriage in Israel.

Moses and Immorality – Deuteronomy 22 outlines the consequences of fornication (including adultery) in Israel. It always punishes adultery by executing the guilty parties. Because remarriage is so much a part of the divorce question today, we note with interest that this penalty has the additional effect of terminating the marriage that the adultery violated.

Deuteronomy 22 is also important for understanding Joseph's actions in Matthew 1, when he finds that Mary is with child out of wedlock. We will see that her case is ambiguous in the light of Deuteronomy 22, and Joseph's actions reflect that ambiguity.

Moses and Divorce – Moses lays down certain laws about divorce in Deut. 24:1-4. As these laws are translated in many versions of the Bible, they seem to permit divorce and remarriage. For instance, the Authorized Version renders them,

When a man has taken a wife, and ... he hath found some uncleanness in her, then let him write her a bill of divorcement ... And ... she may go and be another man's wife (Deut. 24:1-2, AV).

This translation, while possible linguistically, is not the best. There is another rendering that is grammatically preferable. The Lord Jesus endorses this alternate translation in his teaching on divorce in the Gospels. Moses is not telling disgruntled husbands how to get rid of their wives. He is recognizing that divorce does occur, and is telling people what they may and may not do as a result.

In particular, Moses teaches that

IF a couple is divorced, and
IF the wife remarries, and
IF that second union ends,
 whether by death
 or by divorce,
THEN the original couple may not remarry.

Moses and Slave Wives — Two passages in the Mosaic Law describe unions between masters and slaves. In one case, the master purchases a female slave of Israelite birth (Exod. 21:7-11), while in another, the slave is a captive of war (Deut. 21:10-14). In both cases, the Law anticipates that the master may lose interest in the girl. If this happens, he may not simply sell

her, but must allow her to be redeemed, or even set her free without payment, depending on the circumstances.

In these cases, the man has obligations that he does not have toward other slaves. The woman is no longer his property, to be bought and sold as he pleases. Yet she is not fully a wife, either. Though Moses never uses the word of her, we will see that she is a concubine. Moses does not encourage such a relation, or the casual way in which the master loses interest in his slave. Because these things do happen, though, the Law protects the woman.

2.2.2 Do the Prophets give a precedent for divorce?

In Chapter 7 we study prophecies of Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah that describe the Lord's separation from Israel. For example, Hosea is a prophet who preaches in Israel in the eighth century before Christ. His contemporaries have forgotten the Lord, who brought their ancestors out of captivity in Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan, and now worship other gods. Hosea tells them how sinful this apostasy is, and warns them about what will happen if they do not repent.

Hosea, under God's instruction, marries a woman who is later unfaithful to him. He compares himself to God, and his wife to Israel. Just as he married a wife, so God married Israel. Just as his wife betrayed him for other men, so Israel betrayed her Lord and went after other gods. Now God will deal with Israel as a man might deal with an adulterous wife. In 2:2-5, the Lord files a formal legal indictment against Israel, and proclaims, "She is not my wife, neither am I her husband." Hosea describes legal proceedings in which the Lord puts away faithless Israel.

The Lord's law suit against Israel shows that infidelity within marriage is cause for separation. It also shows the form that the separation is to take. This separation does not leave both parties free to remarry. The Lord urges Israel, his "wife," to repent of her sin,

lest I strip her naked, and ... slay her with thirst (Hos. 2:3).

In accordance with the Law of Moses in Deut. 22, the unfaithful wife deserves death, but God graciously offers forgiveness and restoration.

Isaiah and Jeremiah also use the metaphor of marital infidelity to describe Israel's relation to the Lord, and speak of separation between the nation and her divine husband. As in Hosea, this separation does not free the parties to seek other unions. Rather, it offers Israel the choice of reconciliation or death.

2.2.3 Does Ezra promote divorce?

Ezra is a scribe and Bible teacher among the Jews who return to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity in the fifth century B.C. He comes from Babylon to Jerusalem some years after the return of the first settlers. On his arrival, he learns, to his horror, that these earlier colonists have taken pagan partners. These women come from the unbelieving population that the settlers found living in the land when they returned. Ezra realizes that these mixed unions threaten to weaken the Jews' devotion to God, and also to produce offspring accustomed to spiritual compromise. In fervent prayer to God (Ezra 9), he confesses the sin of the people as though it were his own. Then he and the leaders of the people agree that the mixed families should be separated, and they carry out their plan.

At first glance, Ezra seems to be sponsoring community divorce. On closer study in Chapter 3, we will see that the unions he dissolves, unions between believers and unbelievers, are illegal under the law of Moses, which was the constitution of the restored Jewish nation. These unions cannot be considered legitimate, since they violate the civil law. Thus the separations that Ezra demands are completely in order biblically.

2.2.4 Does the Lord Jesus support divorce?

In Chapters 11 through 13, we will give close attention to the Lord Jesus' words on divorce, especially the exception for fornication that Matthew mentions, and examine who becomes guilty of adultery in the case of remarriage.

The Fornication Clause — The Lord Jesus teaches,

Whoever dismisses his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery (Matt. 5:32).

Whoever dismisses his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery (Matt. 19:9).

The Lord says that fornication excuses dismissing and remarriage. Thus many Christians feel that fornication is the one legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage.

It is not.

We will see that "dismissing" does not mean exactly the same thing as "divorce." Divorce is one way to "dismiss" a member in a marriage. But "dismiss" in the Bible can also mean "put to death; kill." In the context of these verses about fornication and dismissal, the Pharisees are distorting what Moses taught about fornication and divorce, and the Lord is correcting their error. Moses taught that the nation Israel should put to death a spouse who is guilty of immorality. This, the Lord says, is the only way to dissolve a marriage so that one spouse is free to remarry.

In other words, the Lord is saying,

Anyone who dismisses his wife by divorce, as you people commonly do, causes her to commit adultery when she remarries, and commits adultery himself by remarriage.

There is, however, one case in which remarriage is not adultery. If she is guilty of fornication, the Law requires Israel to dismiss her, not by divorce, but by execution.

In that case, the surviving spouse may remarry.

Which Parties may Remarry? — In four different passages (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) the Lord Jesus describes a second marriage after a divorce as adultery. Modern Christians sometimes claim that such a marriage may not be adultery, depending on whether the previously married person initiated the divorce or not, or was guilty of infidelity or not. Close study of the Lord's words shows that both parties in a divorce commit adultery if they remarry.

2.2.5 Does Paul permit divorce?

God hates divorce, and his children do all they can to avoid it. Sometimes, though, a believer is divorced by an unbelieving spouse. May the believer remarry?

Paul's words in I Cor. 7:15 have been interpreted as allowing remarriage under these circumstances.

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart. The brother or sister is not enslaved in such cases.

We will see in Chapter 12 that "bondage" here is not the marriage tie, but the obligation to share bed and board with an antagonistic spouse. Each partner in a marriage has duties toward the other. Paul teaches that when an unbelieving partner leaves the marriage, the believer is freed from those duties.

For instance, a wife should submit herself to her husband (Eph. 5:22). If he leaves her, she is no longer bound to obey him. It is quite another thing to say that she is no longer joined to him by God, and thus free to remarry. This Paul does not say. Divorce does not end a marriage so far as God is concerned, whether the one who institutes it is a believer or an unbeliever.

2.3 Practical Questions

Our commitment to be practical as well as exegetical requires that we go beyond the textual studies in Part II and examine how the principles we learn there apply to concrete situations. According to the pattern in 2 Tim. 3:16, we want to move from "doctrine" to "reproof," "correction," and "discipline in righteousness." Part III suggests biblical approaches to several common problems.

2.3.1 What about Divorce and Remarriage before Salvation?

Sometimes Christians treat questions of divorce and remarriage differently depending on whether the divorce or remarriage took place before or after the person involved became a believer in the Lord Jesus. For example, we sometimes hear that divorce before salvation is cleansed away by the blood of Christ, and does not hinder remarriage after salvation. Chapter 13 studies this claim.

The blood of Christ purges the guilt of sin before salvation. It also purges the guilt of sin after salvation, if the sinner repents. The solution for sins committed after salvation is the same as that for sins before salvation.

The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin (I John 1:7).

It is misleading to suggest that God has different rules for pre-salvation divorce and post-salvation divorce. The Bible gives us no grounds to treat one differently from the other. Both may involve sins that can be forgiven. Both may leave consequences, such as the inability to marry someone else.

Marriage does not need church blessing to be binding. A marriage between two unbelievers is a valid marriage, and continues to bind them after they become believers. God has joined them together even though they are unbelievers. If they divorce, they sin against God. If conversion could wipe away previous divorces, it would also wipe away previous marriages, and couples who trust Christ after marriage should be counseled to remarry. The New Testament knows of no such custom. Many things change when one becomes a believer. Marital state--married, unmarried, widowed, divorced — is not one of them.

2.3.2 Should Second Marriages be Dissolved?

How should a pastor counsel someone who is divorced and remarried, and now understands that the remarriage was adulterous? Is it sinful to remain in the second marriage? Should the person try to end the second marriage to avoid continual adultery?

Chapter 14 shows that the adultery is in **entering** the second marriage, not in **continuing** in it. Remarriage is a sin, and demands repentance. But because our society recognizes the second union as marriage, the believer cannot dissolve it without sinning anew. A remarried couple should repent of their sin of adultery, accept the Lord's forgiveness, and strive to obey biblical principles of marriage and the home in their new union.

2.3.3 May Church Officers be Divorced and Remarried?

1 Timothy 3,5 and Titus 1 lay down a number of requirements for people in prominent ministries in the church. Among these is the marital status of the candidate.

An overseer then must be ... the husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:2).

Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife (1 Tim. 3:12).

Let a widow be enrolled ... the wife of one husband (1 Tim. 5:9).

Ordain elders in every city, ... if any be ... the husband of one wife (Titus 1:5,6).

When we study these passages in Chapter 15 we will see that those who represent God's people must not be guilty of adulterous remarriage. God does not recognize divorce. When people divorce and remarry, they are joined by God into two marriages at the same time. Such an experience disqualifies a person from certain positions in the church. Furthermore, the stigma of being multiply married persists even if one of the duplicate spouses dies.

The church needs to honor this restriction. At the same time, it should not pretend that divorce and remarriage is the only sin worthy of note. There are problems other than remarriage that disqualify a person from prominent church positions, and there are ways that a person who has repented of remarriage may serve. The church should require its representatives to meet all the biblical qualifications, including the qualification about multiple spouses, but should not ostracize those who have repented of their sin.

2.3.4 Does Domestic Violence Authorize Divorce?

Many people who oppose divorce in general will justify it in cases of domestic violence. We will learn in Chapter 16 that the Bible condemns strife between people, and so offers no approval of physical abuse in marriage. It also establishes several spheres of authority (the home, the church, and the civil government), so that an abused spouse is justified in seeking the intervention of the church or the civil government. One step that the Bible never endorses is divorce. Children may be separated from their parents if they are endangered, but God has joined man and wife together into one flesh. It is no more biblical to stop abuse by dividing that union than it is to prevent theft by cutting off someone's hands.

2.4 A Summary Principle

Out of the entire study, one overwhelming conclusion emerges:

**There is no biblical basis
for a second marriage after divorce
while the first spouse lives.**

Paul puts it this way, in a more restricted context:

*Let not the wife depart from her husband.
But if she depart,
let her remain unmarried, or let her be
reconciled to her husband (I Cor. 7:10-11).*

It is a terrible thing when husband and wife separate. It may be unavoidable, when an unbelieving partner initiates it. Subsequent marriage to someone else is **not** unavoidable. As long as the first spouse lives, remarriage violates the Lord's solemn command, *Thou shalt not commit adultery.*

CHAPTER 3 WHAT IS A MARRIAGE?

The biblical teachings on divorce apply only to those couples who are truly married, whom "God has joined together." An unmarried couple can be separated, but hardly divorced. If we want to know what the Bible says about divorce, we should know what it considers marriage.

The Bible nowhere gives a succinct definition of marriage that we can apply to situations today to determine whether they qualify. Instead, it gives us many pictures of relationships between men and women, especially in the Old Testament. Some of these relationships qualify as marriage, and some do not. To learn the elements of a biblical marriage, we need to study these pictures and observe what characteristics distinguish the marriages from the non-marriages.

Before we can begin this survey, we need to learn how to recognize a marriage in the Bible when we see one. Biblical writers do not describe marriage in the same terms that we do.

- So we begin by examining biblical language for marriage.
- Then we can test common western notions of marriage against biblical examples to discover the elements of a true marriage.
- Finally, we step back from the pattern we discover to distinguish between a **true** marriage and a **happy** one.

3.1 Biblical Language for Marriage

In an English book, it's easy to tell whether the writer considers two people married or not. A "husband" is a married man and a "wife" is a married woman. In biblical Hebrew and Greek, though, "husband" is usually the same word as "man," and "wife" is the same word as "woman." The translators of the English Bible use "husband" and "wife" to show which couples they think are married. We need to learn to test each case ourselves.

We can use a disciplined method to learn what the biblical marriage vocabulary is.

- There are two sets of words in the Bible, both describing relationships between man and woman, that never overlap. For a given relationship, we may find words from one set, or from the other, but never from both. One set of words includes "fornication" and "adultery," and clearly describes relationships that are not marriage. The other set contains words that imply official marriage, just as "husband" and "wife" do in English. From these two sets of words, we can identify some examples of marriages and some examples of non-marriage.
- When we compare the examples with one another, we find that the examples of marriage contain some expressions or idioms that the examples of non-marriage do not. The individual words in these idioms are not technical words for marriage or non-marriage. However, the idiom as a whole is restricted to one kind of union or the other.
- Once we find that an idiom is restricted to marriage, we can use it to identify further examples of marriage.

An extended note at the end of this chapter gives the results of this study. We use these results to identify the relationships that we examine in the rest of this chapter as examples of marriage or non-marriage. One important conclusion is that, though Hebrew and Greek do not describe marriage with the same language that English does, the use of English marriage

vocabulary (like "husband" and "wife") in the common translations is often reliable, since the expressions in which these terms appear are technical idioms for legitimate unions. In our translations in this book, we will use English marriage vocabulary (like "husband" and "wife") when the underlying Greek or Hebrew expression unambiguously implies marriage, unless the point of the passage turns on knowing the literal sense of the individual word.

3.2 Elements of a True Marriage

When modern Christians think of marriage, they usually think of four things:

- The **physical union** of a man and a woman;
- The **promise** of the couple to live together and care for one another;
- Recognition of their union by the appropriate **civil** authority, so that their family has legal status;
- Recognition of the union by a **religious** group.

In this chapter, we will study each of these four characteristics of a marriage. We will look at couples in the Bible who satisfy different sets of these criteria, and ask whether the Bible considers them married. In this way, we will learn which of the conditions must be satisfied for a couple to be married.

3.2.1 They Shall Be One Flesh--Physical Union

Most people's definition of marriage includes physical union. The Bible teaches that physical union is an important part of marriage. By itself, though, it does not make two people man and wife.

Marriage Involves Physical Union — The first marriage recorded in the Bible is between Adam and Eve in Eden. God took a rib from man, and from it fashioned a woman. He brought her to the man, who said,

This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man (Gen. 2:23)

Moses adds a comment to this record of the origin of marriage:

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh (Gen. 2:24).

The word "therefore" shows the close relation between these verses. Verse 23 says that one person (Adam) became two. Verse 24 says that two people become one. From the physical union of two people there issues a child, recalling the one person from whom the original couple was formed. Physical union commemorates the origin of man and woman as one person. God instituted it before man sinned, so it is not a shameful appendage to a spiritual institution, but a symbol of the true unity of marriage.

Marriage is More than Physical Union — Marriage cannot exist without physical union between man and woman. Physical union alone, though, is not a marriage, as at least two biblical episodes make clear.

The patriarch Jacob, like his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham before him, is a nomad. One of his many campsites is near the home of Shechem, the son of Hamor (Gen. 33:18,19). During Jacob's sojourn there, Shechem saw Jacob's daughter Dinah,

took her, and lay with her, and humbled her (Gen. 34:2).

Shechem and Dinah are united physically. Yet neither Shechem nor Jacob recognizes this union as marriage. Shechem wishes to normalize the relationship, and asks his father, "*Get me this girl for a wife*" (verse 4). Jacob and his sons do not consider the union an automatic marriage, either. They lay stringent requirements on Shechem before they will permit him to marry the woman he has already possessed.

We cannot ... give our sister to one who is uncircumcised. .. If you will not hearken unto us, to be circumcised, then we will take our daughter and go (Gen. 34:14-17).

Both parties realize that physical union alone does not constitute marriage.

The fourth chapter of John's gospel confirms that marriage is more than physical union. There, the Lord Jesus interviews a woman of Samaria. In the course of the conversation,

Jesus says to her, "Go, call your man, and come here."

The phrase "your man" is the common idiom for "your husband," but to understand the dialog, we must remember that the word translated "husband" in the English versions is, strictly, the Greek word for "man."

The woman answered and said, "I don't have a man."

As we show in the notes at the end of the chapter, the phrase "to have a man" (unlike "your man") is ambiguous. It can describe marriage, and the woman seems to intend it in this sense. But it can also refer to cohabitation out of wedlock. The Lord's response plays on this ambiguity.

Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I don't have a man.' For you have had five men, and he whom you now have is not your man" (John 4:16-18).

The conversation turns on the difference between the expressions "your man," which implies marriage, and "to have a man," which implies union but not necessarily marriage. The woman has lived with five men. We do not know whether she was married to any of them, but the Lord makes clear that she is not married to her present partner. Physical union alone is not enough to make them man and wife.

3.2.2 "I John Take Thee Joan"--Commitment

Weddings in Western society involve an exchange of vows between bride and groom. Each person promises some sort of commitment to the other.

Expression of commitment has a place in the marriages of Bible characters as well. There, it takes the form of a covenant, a solemn promise between two parties. Several passages in the Bible show that marriage is a covenant, a promise of commitment between a man and a woman.

The clearest reference to the marriage covenant is in Malachi 2:14-16:

The Lord has testified between you and your youth-wife, with whom you have dealt treacherously. Yet she is your companion, and your covenant-wife. .. Therefore take heed to your spirit, that none

deal treacherously with his youth-wife. For the Lord, the God of Israel, says that he hates putting away. ... Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you deal not treacherously.

Malachi describes a man's wife as "your covenant-wife," the one with whom the husband has entered into a formal agreement. In putting her away, Malachi says that a man "deals treacherously." The English words "deal treacherously" translate the Hebrew term that means, "betray a covenant." Malachi's words show that he considers a man and his proper wife to be bound by covenant to one another.

Jeremiah 3:20 compares the Lord and Israel to husband and wife.

"Surely, as a woman departs treacherously from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with me, house of Israel," says the Lord.

The phrases "depart treacherously" and "deal treacherously" both translate the Hebrew word describing breach of covenant. Israel has violated God's covenant just as a wayward wife violates the marriage covenant.

Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, describes Israel's relation to God under the figure of marriage. He devotes the sixteenth chapter of his book to an elaborate metaphor. Jerusalem is an unwanted baby girl, cast out to perish of exposure. The Lord is a passerby, who discovers the infant and rescues her from certain death. Not only does he save her life, but when she grows to marriageable age,

"I spread my skirt over you, and I covered your nakedness, and I swore unto you, and I entered into a covenant with you," says the Lord God, "and you became mine" (Ezek. 16:8).

The marriage involves a solemn oath ("I swore unto you") that forms the basis for a covenant ("I entered into a covenant with you").

The chapter goes on to picture Israel's idolatry as adultery against the loving husband who has provided so generously for her. By this faithlessness, the Lord says, she has "despised the oath in breaking the covenant" (Ezek. 16:59). Yet her husband does not forsake her:

I myself will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth (Ezek. 16:59).

Ezekiel describes the marriage of the waif to her rescuer as a covenant, and uses the marriage covenant to illustrate God's covenant with Israel. Marriage is a frequent illustration of God's relation to his people in both the Old and the New Testaments. It emphasizes that God's dealings with man involve irrevocable promises.

These examples show that marriage involves an expression of commitment. This promise is an obvious difference between the relation "husband and wife" and the relation "man and harlot."

3.2.3 The Marriage License--Society's Role

Physical union and a promise of commitment are necessary for a marriage. Are they all that is necessary? If a man and a woman pledge themselves to one another, may they live together legitimately as man and wife?

In modern Western cultures, they usually may not. The state regulates marriage, and without its approval a couple does not constitute a legal unit. Even when a government endorses common law marriage, the marriage has legal standing because it is recognized, not just because the partners are committed to one another. The Bible offers precedents for this role of society.

Genesis does not picture the patriarchs under a large central government. Society in that early day is a network of extended families. No marriage is valid without the approval of these families.

When Shechem the son of Hamor desires Dinah the daughter of Jacob as his wife, he does not simply elope with her, but asks his father to arrange the wedding (Gen. 34:4). The families of Hamor and Jacob then enter into elaborate negotiations. The marriage of Shechem and Dinah means the union of two families. Those families have a say in whether the marriage takes place.

The weddings of Isaac with Rebekah, and of Jacob with Rachel and Leah, are similar to the wedding of Shechem and Dinah. In each case, the bride's family must approve the marriage.

Abraham's servant discovers Rebekah at the well of Haran, and knows by a test that she is the woman he has been sent to fetch (Gen. 24:27). He does not speak directly to her about marrying Isaac, but asks to be taken to her father's house. There, he explains his errand to her father Bethuel and brother Laban. Only when they approve do they ask Rebekah what she thinks (Gen. 24:58).

Similarly, when Jacob flees to Haran from Esau his brother, he meets Rachel at the well. He falls in love with her (Gen. 29:18), and his proposal must be cleared with Laban, her father, who is now the leader of the extended family. They agree on terms. Jacob will serve for seven years for the hand of Rachel. At the end of the seven years, Jacob claims his wife, but Laban substitutes his elder daughter Leah, and Jacob finds himself married to the wrong woman. He protests,

"What is this that you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" Then Laban said, "It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfill her week, .." And Jacob did so (Gen. 29:25-28).

Jacob is not pleased with the strictures of Laban's society, but he must acquiesce to them. For without the endorsement of society, there is no true marriage.

Genesis shows the role of society in marriage not only in the weddings of the patriarchs, but also by distinguishing between full wives and concubines. In Chapter 6 we will examine the custom of concubinage and see how it differs from full marriage. The major distinction between a concubine and a full wife is in her legal status. In other words, the difference is defined by society.

In the examples in Genesis, there is no central government. When God does establish a more formal government for his people, marriage is one of the things it regulates. Moses, Israel's great legislator, lays down laws stating who may marry whom. On the one hand, he outlaws some unions (Lev. 18:6-18) because the man and woman are too closely related. On the other, Deut. 7:3,4 forbids marriage with pagans, who because of their idolatry are too foreign to Israel to be joined to its society through marriage.

There are no examples in the Pentateuch of Moses breaking up a union that violates Lev. 18:6-18 or Deut. 7:3,4. In our Chapter 8, we will study how Ezra the priest did separate unlawful unions among the people who returned from Babylon after the captivity. Society defines what is marriage and what is not. Its approval is necessary for two people to marry.

Society's authority to regulate marriage may give the impression that marriage is a man-made custom. It is not. In Matt. 19:6, the Lord Jesus teaches that "God has joined together" those who

are truly married. Marriages are ratified in heaven. That is why we search God's word, rather than books of man's law, for heaven's standards for marriage. God does give society the responsibility for some decisions about marriage. Society has a say, though, only because God so decrees. In turn, he will judge the members of society for how they discharge the responsibility he gives them.

3.2.4 "Before God and These Witnesses"--Religion and Weddings

So far, we have found three elements in marriages that God considers valid: physical union, covenant, and the approval of society. The "traditional wedding" often has a fourth element. It is administered by a religious leader, in a building dedicated to the worship of God. Is this necessary? Must a union be blessed by the church before it is a true marriage?

In the examples we have just studied, it is hard to separate civil and religious approval. Family heads in the Old Testament are the religious leaders of their homes, as well as authorities in the society of the day. Moses is not only Israel's lawgiver, but also her first prophet, a notable religious leader. When Bethuel, or Laban, or Moses approves a wedding, that wedding enjoys both civil and spiritual approval.

Perhaps, though, only one of those authorities is necessary. We could tell, if we had an example of a civil authority that is not religious, or a religious authority that is not civil. The New Testament gives us both. It teaches that the church is a spiritual authority, but not a civil one. It also teaches that believers are to respect secular government as a civil authority, but not a spiritual one. When we survey church involvement in marriages in the New Testament, we find that marriages contracted without church approval are binding, though not pleasing to God. Thus we conclude that it is the civil, not the spiritual, approval of Old Testament society that makes a marriage binding.

Unblessed Marriages are Binding — If the New Testament required church blessing for a marriage to be binding, it might express that requirement in two ways.

1. It might contain instruction, or at least some record, of the church's role in marrying men and women.
2. It might give some indication that people who "marry" before salvation are really living in sin, with some examples of converts remarrying to make their unions valid.

The New Testament has much to say about marriage. Yet it shows neither of these signs.

The New Testament gives no instructions or precedents for church weddings. We have both instruction (in the Epistles) and examples (in Acts) of the church's activity in baptism, the Lord's Supper, caring for the poor, preaching, evangelism, prayer, and church discipline, but not a word about the church as an agent of marriage. Paul commands young widows to marry (1 Tim. 5:14), and condemns those who forbid marriage (1 Tim. 4:3), but he never gives the church a role in legitimizing a union. This silence does not forbid church ceremonies, but it does leave us without biblical support for insisting on them.

Furthermore, the church accepts secular marriages. In I Corinthians 7, Paul encourages believers married to unbelievers to stay married rather than seek separation. These mixed marriages probably originated with the secular marriage of two unbelievers. Later, only one partner believed on Christ. Paul regards these unions, solemnized according to the civil custom of the day, as real marriages, and as binding on the participants.

Nowhere does the New Testament ever tell those who are first married and then saved to remarry. The first believers are all adult converts, and in many cases converts from paganism. These converts must change many aspects of their lives when they "turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (I Thess. 1:9). One aspect they are never told to change is their relationship to their lawful wives.

Church blessing is not necessary to make a marriage binding. Unbelievers as well as believers can be lawfully married, if their physical union is founded on an expression of commitment to one another and obeys the laws of their society.

Unblessed Marriages are Sinful — The church's blessing is not needed to make a marriage binding, but it is essential if a marriage is to please God. At this point in our discussion, we focus our attention on the marriages of believers. So far as unbelievers are concerned, neither their marriages nor anything else they do can please God, for they are his enemies until they repent and receive salvation (Rom. 8:7,8). The point here is that the marriage of a believer, though binding with respect to divorce, can still be displeasing to God if the believer enters it in violation of New Testament teaching.

The church has higher standards for marriage than does secular society. For instance, in I Cor. 7:39, Paul teaches that a single woman (in this case, a widow)

is at liberty to be married to whom she will, only in the Lord.

Because of this teaching, a church should not allow its members to marry unbelievers. Believers who enter such unions, against the instruction of the church, should be disciplined. If their unions meet the three conditions of a binding marriage, the believers are not guilty of adultery. However, they are guilty of disobeying biblical teaching about separation.

In a society that sanctions polygamy, a man may legitimately have several wives at once. A believing man who takes several wives is not living in adultery, but he has disobeyed the biblical standard of monogamy. The church should discipline him, and (as we will see in Chapter 15) should not allow him to serve in positions of leadership.

Godly believers seek the sanction of their local church when they marry, and ask God's blessing on their union. It is wonderful when believers marry in the presence of other believers, and thus dedicate their life together to the Lord. The religious ceremony can be of great spiritual value. However, it does not make the marriage legitimate unless the state gives it that role.

3.3 True Marriages and Happy Marriages

We have found three criteria that must be present in unions that the Bible recognizes as marriage:

1. Physical union;
2. A promise of mutual commitment;
3. The approval of their society or government.

These are important conditions. Yet the Bible describes other conditions that can make a marriage godly or sinful, happy or sad. For example:

- Both the Old Testament and the New Testament exhort believers not to marry unbelievers.

- The parents of Isaac (Gen. 24:3,4) and Jacob (Gen. 27:46-28:2) insist that their sons seek wives from their own culture, suggesting the value of marrying a person from a similar social background.
- The New Testament requires church leaders to have only one wife each, and even the Old Testament exposes polygamy as an invitation to unhappiness.

A common faith, a common background, and monogamy are all criteria for a happy marriage. Are they also necessary for a valid marriage?

Principles such as monogamy are essential to a good marriage. They do not, though, make the difference between marriage and fornication. A polygamous marriage violates New Testament teaching and threatens its members with unhappiness. But if it includes physical union, a promise of commitment, and social approval, it is binding, and the biblical teachings on divorce apply to it.

The three criteria we found in this chapter are not enough to guarantee a good marriage. Instead, they are the fewest conditions under which God considers two people married at all. Two people who satisfy only the necessary criteria will probably not be happy together. Still, God has joined them together, and if they divide their union they are guilty of divorce.

It takes very little to be biblically married. The simplicity of the criteria gives a strong warning. God allows no trial weddings, no apprentice marriages, no middle ground between fornication and lawful union. We cannot later break a sad or sinful marriage because we think there is no love in it, or because it lacks church approval, or because one member is a believer and the other is not. If a couple is married at all, God considers them married until he separates them in death. It takes many ingredients to make a marriage happy, but only three conditions to make it permanent. We must enter marriage with great caution, lest we be trapped in a union that offers neither happiness nor escape.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the necessary elements in a valid marriage?
2. Why cannot we rely on the use of the words "husband" and "wife" to tell who in the Bible is married?
3. What does the "one flesh" relationship commemorate?
4. Please cite an episode in the Bible to show that physical union alone does not constitute marriage.
5. What is there in common between marriage and God's relation to his people that makes one so suitable an illustration of the other?
6. Why is it reasonable for society to regulate marriage?
7. Did Moses regulate marriage in his capacity as a religious leader, or in his capacity as a civil legislator?
8. Is a Christian couple living in fornication if their marriage has not been blessed by the church? Why or why not?
9. What are the consequences if a believer disobeys biblical principles concerning marriage and the home?

10. Should a believer enter a marriage based only on the three criteria studied in this chapter? Why or why not?

NOTES

3.4 Biblical Language for Marriage

At the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned the problem of identifying legitimate marriages in the Bible. English words like "husband" and "wife" do not have common unambiguous counterparts in Hebrew and Greek. Those languages do distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate unions, but they do it with a set of words and idioms rather different from those of English. This note outlines the biblical expressions that allow us to identify a particular relation as marriage.

Biblical language for marriage falls into two classes.

1. Hebrew and Greek have some individual words that refer explicitly to concepts related to marriage or concubinage. When a writer uses one of these terms, we know that a legitimate union is in view. These terms appear much less often in biblical text than their counterparts do in English.
2. The Bible commonly uses idioms of ownership to describe marriage. Though these idioms are not limited to the relation between man and wife, they do not seem to be used of men and women in illegitimate unions. That is, they can describe a man and his wife, or a man and his ox, but not a man and a harlot.

3.4.1 Words for Marriage Concepts

Some biblical words specifically describe marriage, and allow us to detect legal unions. They do not usually distinguish between full marriage and concubinage, a legal union with a slave. Chapter 6 will study the differences between marriage and concubinage, and help us to keep these two relations straight.

3.4.1.1 In-Laws

Though the Bible does not single out "husband" and "wife" with special words, it does have special word families for "daughter-in-law," "son-in-law," and "sibling-in-law." The ancients realized very acutely that marriage joins together not just two individuals, but two families as well.

The Hebrew words for in-laws are not straightforward translations of the English terms. In English, for instance, "father-in-law" can refer either to a woman's husband's father or to a man's wife's father. In Hebrew, two different words distinguish these concepts. So we must be careful to identify precisely the relation described by each of the words we study.

The Hebrew word כלה "daughter-in-law" describes the relation between a woman and either of her husband's parents. Sarah is the daughter-in-law of Terah, the father of Abraham, in Gen. 11:31, and the same word describes Tamar's relationship to Judah in Gen. 38:11,16,24; 1 Chr. 2:4, by virtue of her marriage to his sons Er and Onan. The word also describes the wife of Phinehas the son of Eli (1 Sam. 4:19), and Ruth and Orpah, the wives of the sons of Naomi (Ruth 1:6,7,8,22; 2:20,22). This last case shows that a wife is the "daughter-in-law" of her husband's mother as well as of his father.

The laws of incest reflect the closeness of the relationship established by marriage. A daughter-in-law is so closely bound into the family that physical intimacy between her and her husband's father would be incest (Lev. 18:15; 20:12; Ezek. 22:11).

The expression "daughter-in-law" almost always describes a woman who is either engaged or newly married, and so takes on the meaning "bride." In Cant. 4:8-12; 5:1; Isa. 62:5, the English versions render it "spouse" or "bride." A related word means "betrothal" in Jer. 2:2.

Another word, **הָתָן**, means "son-in-law," and describes the relation between a man and his wife's father. Lot has at least two sons-in-law in Sodom (Gen. 19:12,14). Samson's marriage to a Philistine woman involves an extended feast (Judges 14), and results in him being a son-in-law to her father (Judg. 15:6). David would have had this relationship to Saul if Saul had kept his promise to give his daughter Merab to David (1 Sam. 18:18). Later, David becomes Saul's son-in-law by marrying Michal (1 Sam. 22:14). Tobiah is described as Shechaniah's son-in-law in Neh. 6:18, and Joiada's son is Sanballat's son-in-law in Neh. 13:28. Judges 19:5 uses "son-in-law" to describe the relationship between a Levite and the father of his concubine. We do not know whether the word could be applied to the relation between a man and his wife's mother.

As does "daughter-in-law," "son-in-law" can lose its emphasis on the relationship between families and come to mean "bridegroom." Zipporah uses it in this way to describe Moses in Ex. 4:25,26. It often stands parallel to "daughter-in-law" to describe "bride and bridegroom" (Isa. 62:5; Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Joel 2:16).

We have already noted that Hebrew has two distinct words for "father-in-law." One of these, **הָתָן**, is a cognate of **הָתָן** "son-in-law," and means "wife's father" (not "husband's father"). It describes the fathers of Moses' two wives, Jethro (Ex. 3:1; 4:18; 18:1-27) and Hobab (Num. 10:29; Judges 1:16; 4:11), and also the father of the Levite's concubine (Judges 19:4,7,9). The feminine form of "wife's father" means "wife's mother," a relation so close that physical union within it is incest (Deut. 27:23).

Another related noun, **הַתְּנָה**, means "marriage," but occurs only in Cant. 3:11.

The verbal form of **הָתָן** is **הִתְתָּן**, and emphasizes the alliances that form between families as a result of marriage. David performs this action by marrying Saul's daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18:21-27), and Solomon by marrying Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 3:1). The verb also describes what happens to the parents when their children marry. Jehoshaphat does this to Ahab (2 Chr. 18:1), probably not by marrying Ahab's daughter himself, but by having his son marry her (2 Chr. 21:6). Hamor the father of Shechem proposes this sort of alliance with Jacob in Gen. 34:9. Later, God forbids Israel to enter into such alliances with the pagan inhabitants of Palestine (Deut. 7:3; Josh. 23:12; Ezr. 9:14).

The second Hebrew word for "father-in-law" is **תָּם** "husband's father," which describes the relation of Judah to his son's wife Tamar (Gen. 38:13,25), and Eli to the wife of his son Phinehas (1 Sam. 4:19,21). A feminine form of this same word, **תָּמוֹת** "husband's mother," describes the relation of Naomi to her son's wife Ruth (Ruth 1:14; 2:11,18,19,23; 3:1,6,16,17).

The in-law relation among siblings is especially important in the Old Testament because of the law of levirate marriage. This law requires that if a married man dies without children, his brother should marry the widow and beget children to inherit the dead man's name and estate.

יָבִים "brother-in-law" describes the husband's brother who must marry the widow (Deut. 25:5,7). The widow is his יְבִמָּה "sister-in-law" (Deut. 25:7,9). "Sister-in-law" also describes the relation of Ruth and Orpah (Ruth 1:15), who marry brothers and are both then widowed. A related verb describes the action of carrying out the duty of a husband's brother toward his wife (Deut. 25:7; Gen. 38:8).

3.4.1.2 Other Relations

Besides special vocabulary for in-laws, the Bible has distinctive terms describing concubines, betrothal, illicit unions, and (in Greek) marriage itself.

In Chapter 6, we will discuss the ancient custom of concubinage, or marriage to a slave. While this relationship is viewed as inferior to a full marriage, it is still a legitimate union. Sometimes it is described with a special word (for example, in Gen. 25:6 and 35:22).

In biblical custom, engagement or betrothal is almost as serious an undertaking as is marriage itself. In becoming engaged, the man pays a bride-price to his fiancée's father. Hebrew uses two distinctive words, a noun and a verb, for this transaction. They are reserved for discussions of marriage, and never refer to general commercial transactions.

The verb אָרַשׁ is commonly translated "to betroth," and focuses especially on payment of the bride-price. This action is the step before marriage in Deut. 20:7; 22:23-28; 28:30; Exod. 22:15. David satisfies this requirement for Michal, Saul's daughter, by slaying a hundred Philistines, 2 Sam. 3:14. The Lord, in describing his spiritual marriage to Israel, uses this word in Hos. 2:19,20 (Hebrew 2:21,22), where he describes the dowry he has paid as "righteousness, judgment, lovingkindness, mercies, and faithfulness."

The noun for the bride-price itself is מוֹהָר. Shechem offers to pay an arbitrarily large dowry for Dinah (Gen. 34:12). The word describes the Philistines that Saul demanded of David for Michal (1 Sam. 18:25). The amount involved is set by custom, and Exod. 22:17 (Hebrew 22:16) refers to that amount in setting the fine for rape, if the girl's father forbids the couple to marry. The previous verse uses a related verb to describe payment of the dowry if they do marry.

So far, all the terms we have studied have indicated that a legitimate union exists between a man and a woman. Another group of terms show us when a union is definitely not legitimate. The English versions translate these words uniformly in both Testaments as "fornication" and "adultery." "Fornication" refers to any physical union not within the bonds of legitimate marriage or concubinage, and includes incest, rape, prostitution, and general immorality. It is closely related to a noun that means "harlot" or "prostitute." "Adultery" refers to any physical union in which one partner is married to someone else. The Lord's words in Matt. 19:9 show that whether the cheating spouse is the husband or the wife, the action is still called "adultery."

Hebrew has no common verb with the range of meaning of English "to marry," and occurrences of "marry" in the English Old Testament are usually paraphrases of less specific Hebrew idioms. Greek, though, does have a general verb γαμέω "to marry," which indicates the existence of a legitimate union between two people.

3.4.2 The Language of Ownership

When the Bible uses its special marriage vocabulary, we can easily identify the relation being described as definitely legitimate (or, in the case of "adultery" and "fornication," definitely illegitimate). In addition to these special words, the Bible has some idioms that indicate the existence of marriage. These idioms are made up of common words that in themselves do not identify a union as legitimate or illegitimate. Each overall expression, though, is regularly used to indicate that a man and a woman are married. They are conspicuously absent in descriptions of rape and harlotry.

A common semantic element running through the various biblical idioms for marriage is the notion of ownership. Both Hebrew and Greek have general ways to indicate that a person owns something. When the "something" is a person of the opposite sex, marriage is often in view. Most of the expressions describe the husband as owning the wife, but one very common idiom shows clearly that the wife also owns the husband. Some of the expressions (notably the genitive) can express other close relations besides that of ownership, but the common notion in all of these expressions is ownership, and their common use for marriage brings this notion to the fore.

This emphasis on marriage as a kind of ownership is as strong in the Bible as it is weak in modern society. Today people strongly reject any suggestion that one person could own another, feeling that such an interpretation of marriage is tantamount to slavery. There is an important difference, though. Slavery is a one-way ownership, and marriage is two-way. Abuse and oppression in marriage do not arise from an overemphasis on the notion of ownership, but from an underemphasis. Because each member owns the other, each is also owned, and neither is justified in abusing or exploiting the other. The biblical conclusion from the interpretation of marriage as ownership is that

the woman does not have authority over her own body, but the man does. Similarly, the man does not have power over his own body, but the woman does (1 Cor. 7:4).

The ownership expressions that we will discuss are restricted in the Bible to legitimate relationships. There are some other ownership expressions that describe illicit unions. We know that an expression describes marriage, not because it speaks of ownership, but because it does not appear in descriptions of rape, harlotry, or fornication. It is interesting, though, that when we have identified the marriage idioms, they emphasize ownership so strongly.

Verbs of Buying and Ruling.—The closest thing Hebrew has to a verb meaning "to marry" is לָבַד (lābād "to rule." It describes authority and lordship in general, and appears in this sense in 1 Chr. 4:22 (of the rulers of Moab) and Isa. 26:13 (of earthly rulers in general). It is used specifically of the man's relation to his woman in Deut. 24:1, and in Deut. 21:15, where it describes concubinage.

The passive form of the verb designates a woman as married. It describes Sarah in Gen. 20:3, and is the determining factor in identifying an illicit union as adultery in Deut. 22:22.

The related noun בַּעַל (ba'āl) is the closest word Hebrew has to English "husband." It describes Abraham's relation to Sarah in Gen. 20:3, and Uriah's relation to Bathsheba in 2 Sam. 11:26 (second time; first is "her man.") Unlike English "husband," it is not restricted to marriage, but

can describe a man as the owner of an ox (Exod. 21:28-29), a house (Exod. 27:7), or an ass (Isa. 1:3), among other things.

In Ruth 4:10, Boaz describes his marriage to Ruth with the verb קנה "to acquire." The verb elsewhere describes the purchase of such things as land (Gen. 47:20), slaves (Deut. 28:68), or a sash (Jer. 13:1). Its use for a wife clearly illustrates how marriage is viewed as a kind of ownership.

The Possessive Genitive.—Most references in the English Bible to "his wife" or "her husband" are literally "his woman" or "her man" in the original. The construction is exactly the same as that used to describe anything that someone owns. Moses uses the construction in Exod. 20:17 to describe not only "your neighbor's wife" (literally, "your neighbor's woman), but also "your neighbor's house, his manservant, his maidservant, his ox, his ass." It is this construction that shows that the wife owns the husband, just as the husband owns the wife.

Though the nouns in these expressions literally mean "man" and "woman" instead of "husband" and "wife," the Bible applies the expressions almost exclusively to legitimate unions. Thus, in the context of the whole idiom, the translation "husband" or "wife" is usually appropriate, and accurately conveys the meaning of the text.

A few of the wives described as "his woman" are Eve to Adam (Gen. 3:20; 4:1,25); Sarah to Abraham (Gen. 12:5,11; 20:2); Lot's wife (Gen. 19:16,26); Mary to Joseph (Matt. 1:20,24); Elisabeth to Zechariah (Luke 1:5,13,18,24); and Sapphira to Ananias (Acts 5:1,7). The vast majority of biblical references to "his wife" really refer to "his woman," using this idiom.

Conversely, a wife's husband is "her man." Examples include Abraham to Sarah (Gen. 16:13); Manoah to his wife (Judg. 13:9); Elqanah to Hannah (1 Sam. 1:8,23; 2:19); Phinehas to his wife (1 Sam. 4:19,21); and Phaltiel to Michal (2 Sam. 3:16). In Judg. 19:3, even a concubine owns "her man" in this way. We will see in Chapter 6 that this ownership gives her certain rights that other slaves do not enjoy. In 2 Sam. 11:26, Uriah is twice identified as Bathsheba's husband, first with the noun אב (ab and a second time as "her man".

The genitive is occasionally used casually for an enduring union with slight irregularities, as in Judges 21:21. There it describes women kidnapped from a harvest festival to reestablish the tribe of Benjamin after the other tribes have sworn a rash oath not to give Benjamin their daughters in marriage. The kidnapping is indeed arranged by some of the other tribes, as a legal fiction: if the men of Benjamin steal their daughters, the tribes will not be guilty of breaking their oath. The woman seized by each Benjamite is termed "his woman," though the relationship is one of rape and not of marriage. The expression may be used proleptically, but there is no indication in the context that the unions were subsequently normalized with the payment of the bride price as Deut. 22:29 requires. More likely, the genitive is applicable to any abiding relationship, most of which will naturally be legitimate unions rather than fornication.

"Give, Take, Be" with Indirect Object.—Greek has a verb meaning simply "to marry," but the Hebrew verbs describing marriage are fairly rare, and all focus on particular aspects of the transaction, such as paying the bride-price or establishing an alliance between families. To describe marriage in general, Hebrew uses idioms involving the verbs "to take," "to give," and "to be." (Another verb, נשא "to lift up," occurs occasionally where one would expect "to take." We will discuss it in Chapter 8.)

The basic expression is formed with the verb "to be," and appears in English translations as "she became his wife." This expression appears in three contexts in the Old Testament. Sometimes it occurs alone, sometimes it is paired with "to take," and sometimes the verb "to be" drops out and the expression merges with "to take" or "to give."

The basic expression appears in the English Bible in the words, "she became his wife." This translation overstates things a bit. As usual, "wife" here simply translates the Hebrew word for "woman," so that we might render the expression, "she became his woman." In English, though, these words could describe fornication, while in Hebrew they are restricted to legitimate unions. The notion is not just that "she became his," an idiom that can describe a casual union (Judges 15:2). The Hebrew idiom emphasizes that she assumes with respect to him the particular role of "woman," with all the echoes of the episode in which she received that title (Gen. 2:18-25).

The same construction appears twice in the common statement of God to Israel, "You shall be my people and I shall be your God." In one sense, every nation belongs to God, and God is God over them all. This expression, though, emphasizes the special, selective relationship that binds God and Israel together. So also, the idiom "she became his woman" reflects the special ownership of a legitimate union.

Marriages described with this idiom include Sarah and Abraham (Gen. 20:12); Abigail and David (1 Sam. 25:42); Bathsheba and David (2 Sam. 11:27); Ahab's daughter and Jehoram (2 Kings 8:18); and Tabat and Ben-Abinadab (1 Kings 4:11).

The most formal Old Testament idiom for marriage results from combining the expression "she became his woman" with the clause "he took her." By itself, "he took her" does not imply marriage, and can even describe rape (Gen. 34:2). The composite expression, though, occurs only with true marriages: "he took her and she became his woman." It describes the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca (Gen. 24:67), David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:10), and Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 4:13).

Literally, the formal idiom is, "he took her, and she was to him as a woman." The most common verbal idioms for marriage have all the parts of this expression except for "and she was." They occur both with "to take," describing the role of the husband and his family, and with "to give," describing the role of the wife's family.

With "to take," this expression emphasizes the role of the husband and his family: "he took her to him as a woman." This expression appears in English translations in such forms as "he took her to him to wife," "he took her for his wife," or "he took her to be his wife." Usually the man himself takes his wife, but sometimes the subject of the verb is his father or mother. Men who take their own wives include Pharaoh taking Sarah (Gen. 12:19); Isaac taking Rebecca (Gen. 25:20); Esau taking Maxlat (Gen. 28:9); and David taking Abigail (1 Sam. 25:39,40). Parents who take wives for their sons include Hamor requesting Dinah for Shechem (Gen. 34:4) and Samson's parents taking a Philistine girl for him (Judg. 14:2).

A similar idiom states, "he took to him a woman." In this case, no particular woman is named, and the expression has a meaning similar to "he got married." Examples include Lamech (Gen. 4:19). Abraham uses this expression several times when he sends his servant to find a bride, as yet unidentified, for Isaac: "Take to him a woman," or as we might say, "Get him a wife" (Gen. 24:4, 7, 37, 38, 40).

A still simpler expression, "he took a woman," seems to have a similar meaning in Gen. 25:1 (describing Abraham and his concubine Keturah) and Jer. 29:6. We should be cautious, though, since the expression "he took X," where X is a specific woman, can also refer to an illicit union, as in the rape of Dinah (Gen. 34:2).

The basic idiom with "to give" is, "he [typically the girl's father or brother] gave her to him [the bridegroom] as a woman." Examples include Caleb giving his daughter Achsah to Othniel (Josh. 15:17; Judg. 1:13); Rachel giving her handmaid Bilha to Jacob as his concubine (Gen. 30:4; cf. 30:9); and Pharaoh giving his subject Asenath to Joseph (Gen. 41:45).

Sexual ownership apart from marriage.—The biblical marriage idioms all reflect ownership, but not all ownership expressions are restricted to marriage.

In Gen. 34:2, the words, "he took her," describe the rape of Dinah, while the expression two verses later, "take this girl to me as a woman" is a request to arrange a formal marriage. The addition of the words "as a woman" to the latter expression distinguishes it from the former one, and shows that it reflects ownership in marriage rather than simply physical possession.

Judges 14 records the betrothal and wedding feast of Samson to his Philistine wife. After the wedding he leaves her for a season, and her father gives her to another man. When Samson returns to enjoy his conjugal rights, her father explains that she now belongs to someone else, and offers Samson her sister, with the words, "let her be yours instead" (Judges 15:2). The point at issue is physical union, not a formal marriage, for there is no mention of a betrothal or marriage feast for the second girl, only of Samson possessing her. The father's offer reflects ownership apart from marriage.

In the New Testament, the verb εἶχον "to have" describes physical union, but does not imply marriage. In John 4:18, the Lord Jesus tells the woman at the well of Sychar that the man "whom you have is not your man." "Your man" is the standard idiom for husband. The man in question is not her husband, though she "has him" in the sense of physical relations. John the Baptist rebukes Herod for taking his brother's wife with the words, "It is not lawful for you to have her" (Matt. 14:4). Paul rebukes the Corinthians for their tolerance of the shameful sin, "that one should have his father's woman" (1 Cor. 5:1). In each case, the verb "to have" emphasizes physical union, and is not restricted to legitimate marriage.

3.4.3 Summary

The Bible's language for describing marriage does not line up exactly with English terminology, but it does have its own internal logic that allows us to recognize legitimate unions. In addition to specific technical terms for the relationships among families that marriage produces, the Bible has an extensive set of idioms that describe marriage in terms of mutual ownership. These biblical words and expressions form the foundation of our understanding of marriage, and thus of divorce, in the Bible.

3.5 Is a Marriage a Covenant?

In this chapter and throughout this book, I frequently emphasize that marriage is a covenant. This position is not universally held, especially among Jewish scholars. For instance, Moshe Greenberg 1983:277-278 insists that the application of covenant terminology to marriage in

Ezek. 16:8 is only metaphorical. He feels that the view of marriage as a covenant rests only on Mal. 2:14 and Prov. 2:17, passages for which other interpretations exist.

The existence of other interpretations for Mal. 2:14 and Prov. 2:17 does not in itself invalidate the interpretation which understands "covenant" in these passages as referring to a marriage covenant. Scholars probably hesitate here because they do not want to introduce a notion to these two texts that is not attested elsewhere in the Old Testament. However, these passages are not the sole basis for seeing marriage as a covenant. At least two other strands of evidence can be cited. the allegory of Ezekiel 16, and the use of the verb בגד to describe marital unfaithfulness.

3.5.1 The Allegory of Ezekiel 16

Greenberg raises the issue of whether marriage is a covenant because the passage he is expounding, Ezekiel 16, describes it as one. The Lord describes Israel as an abandoned waif, and himself as a passerby who discovers her, raises her to maturity, and then marries her. Their union is described with the words,

I spread my skirt over you, and I covered your nakedness, and I swore an oath to you, and I entered into covenant with you, ... and you became mine (16:8).

The word "covenant" also appears explicitly in Ezek. 16:60,62.

No one questions that Israel is in covenant with the Lord. The reality of which Ezekiel 16 is a picture includes the covenant God made with the nation at Mount Sinai. The question is whether the reference to "covenant" in 16:8 is part of the metaphor, describing a marriage covenant, or whether at that point the prophet drops out of metaphorical language to refer to the reality that the metaphor represents.

The passage is smoother rhetorically if "covenant" here refers to the marriage, with an allusion to the covenant of Sinai, thus preserving the continuity of the metaphor. Furthermore, we can better understand the use of marriage as a metaphor for Israel's covenant relation to the Lord if marriage is also a covenant. The notion of covenant relation becomes one of the common points between image and reality that makes the metaphor possible.

3.5.2 The Use of בגד

In this chapter and Chapter 7, we note the use of the Hebrew verb בגד to describe violation of marital responsibilities. Throughout the Old Testament, this verb is a technical term for breach of covenant. Its use with reference to marriage is strong evidence that marriage is also considered a covenant.

Erlandsson 1974:470-473 analyzes the occurrences of the verb into four categories. The first is marriage. The second is Israel's covenant with the Lord. The third is man's relation to the created order, which can be traced to the covenant God established with man through Noah in Genesis 9. The fourth is human agreements and treaties. The last three all involve covenants of one form or another. So it is reasonable to understand the use of the term with reference to marriage to imply that marriage is also a covenant relationship.

3.6 Are Broken Covenants Dissolved?

The observation that marriage is a covenant has led some writers to conclude that since covenants can be broken, so can marriage, leaving the partners free to remarry. This argument is the cornerstone of an elaborate treatise by William Luck (1987). To highlight the issues, we will discuss his position as an example, first outlining its basic elements, then examining his conclusion.

Luck's position has three main elements.

First, he distinguishes between unilateral covenants imposed by a sovereign on a subject, and bilateral covenants in which the parties are of equal standing, and argues that the Old Testament shows marriage to be bilateral. Citing Killen and Rea 1975, he maintains that such covenants persist only as long as both parties accept and fulfill their conditions.

Then he seeks to establish what vows the marriage covenant includes. Though the Old Testament nowhere enumerates these vows in so many words, inductive study of several passages suggests that the man is responsible to provide for the wife's bodily needs (Exod. 21:10), to be present with her, not to abuse her body (Exod. 21:26), and to protect her reputation (Deut. 22:19), and that the woman is responsible to be faithful to her husband (Num. 5:19), not to abuse his body, and to be present with him. Luck concludes that violation of any of these provisions breaks the covenant.

For our purposes, the most important step in his argument is the conclusion (66) that "Since marriage is a bilateral covenant, the covenant is truly broken when one party fails to keep the vows.... Implied in this 'breaking' is that the moral obligation of the 'innocent' party to keep fulfilling his or her side of the agreement is technically ended." That is, Luck assumes that once a covenant (at least a bilateral covenant) is broken, all of its terms are cancelled. In particular, when a marriage covenant is broken, the marriage ceases to exist.

All three steps in this argument have serious methodological flaws.

Bilateral and Unilateral Covenants.—The distinction between bilateral and unilateral covenants on the basis of the equality or inequality of the parties is difficult to sustain, since (setting aside marriage), every other contract in the Bible that is explicitly called a covenant is between a superior and an inferior, most commonly between God and his people. It is well known (Kitchen 1966) that even these "divine covenants" are patterned after contemporary human covenants. In fact, in classifying the covenant of Sinai as bilateral (1987:30), Luck implicitly violates his own definitions. The biblical evidence would suggest that all covenants are bilateral, in that they involve two parties; all are conditional, in that they obligate the participants to certain actions; and all are between a superior and an inferior party. Incidentally, this insight shows that submission in marriage is not a New Testament addition to the Old Testament concept, as Luck suggests, but rather (as his citation of 1 Pet. 3:5,6 should have led him to realize) integral to the notion of marriage as a covenant.

The Covenant Requirements.—While the marriage covenant certainly has requirements, one is uncomfortable with the methodology by which Luck derives these requirements. Several of the conditions that he proposes are mentioned only in laws concerning slaves and concubines, and require an argument *a fortiori* to extend them to marriage. Even then, it is not clear that all the provisions he identifies constitute breach of covenant. For example, Luck cites Exod. 21:9,10 as evidence that the covenant binds the man to provide for his wife's bodily needs, but in fact it is

only selling the concubine out of the family that the passage identifies as breach of covenant, as we will discuss later. The provisions of 21:10 are presented, not as covenant vows, but as *משפט הבנות* "the custom of daughters" (21:9), the socially acceptable way to treat a dependent woman in one's household. We simply do not have an exhaustive list of the provisions of the marriage covenant preserved for us in the Old Testament.

The Results of Breach of Covenant.—Luck seeks a precise identification of the covenant conditions because of his conclusion that a broken covenant ceases to be binding, and his desire to make more precise under what terms the marriage covenant is dissolved. He derives the conclusion that a broken covenant is dissolved rhetorically, without any appeal to biblical data, and in fact there are no biblical examples of what happens in a human covenant to the obligations of one party when the other party breaks the covenant. We do have abundant teaching about God's covenant with Israel at Sinai. Luck himself considers this a "bilateral" covenant, and it is the basis of the prophetic metaphor about God's marriage to Israel. Furthermore, though it is between God and Israel rather than between two humans, it follows the form of purely human suzerainty treaties, so the data it offers would seem to be relevant. Several passages show that breach of this covenant by one party does not dissolve the agreement.

The first such passage is Lev. 26:15-44. Verse 15 anticipates that Israel may break the Sinaitic covenant. The following verses, through verse 43, outline the judgments that God will bring upon them as a consequence of their action. Study of secular covenants from the ancient world shows that such judgments are as much a part of the covenant as are the blessings that the covenant promises to those who keep it (Kitchen 1966:92-93). That is, the covenant specifies not only what Israel must do, but what God will do to her if she breaks the covenant. If people in the ancient world considered a covenant to be dissolved the moment one party broke it, it would make no sense to embed such sanctions in the covenant, for the very act that breaks the covenant and thus calls the sanctions into action would remove the legal basis for the aggrieved party to invoke them.

Even more direct evidence for the persistence of the covenant after one party breaks it is the verse immediately after the recital of the punishments, Lev. 26:44. God promises that in spite of Israel's breach of covenant, and in spite of the judgments that he will send on her as a result, he will not "break [his] covenant with them." Regardless of Israel's rebellion, he considers himself still bound under the terms of the covenant, so that to deviate from it would be to break it.

The book of Jeremiah reflects the same consciousness that breach of covenant by one party does not dissolve the whole arrangement. In Jer. 11:10, God declares, *The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant which I made with their fathers*, and in 14:20 the people acknowledge that they have indeed sinned. Yet they go on to plead in 14:21, *do not disgrace your glorious throne; remember, do not break your covenant with us*. According to their concept of covenant, it would disgrace God's righteous rule for him to break his covenant, even though they have already broken it! The covenant continues in force even though one party has broken it.

Ps. 106 describes how Israel sins repeatedly against the Lord, and how he punishes them. In spite of their blatant disregard of the covenant, verse 45 claims that God has mercy on them because *he remembered for them his covenant*. Once again, the covenant persists even though one party breaks it.

The covenant of Sinai is finally rendered ineffective, but not because one party breaks it. It continues as a binding covenant through the anarchy of the period of the judges, the idolatry of the divided kingdom, the judgments of Assyrian and Babylonian captivity, and the repeated lapses of the restoration. In spite of Israel's sin, the covenant persists until Christ. Then it finally becomes ineffective, not because people break it, but because the Messiah fulfills and completes it (2 Cor. 3:14 [Greek]; Heb. 8:13).

Thus the biblical data show that breach of covenant does not dissolve the covenant, at least for the only covenant on which we have enough information to draw a conclusion. Marriage is a covenant, and many actions may violate its terms, but none of these can annul it or excuse either party from further obedience.

**PART II:
INTERPRETATION: THE BIBLICAL TEXTS ON DIVORCE**

CHAPTER 4 THE LAW OF MOSES AND FORNICATION

In the last chapter, we learned that God has given civil government the responsibility to define standards and regulations for marriage. God gave ancient Israel, as a civic body, many statutes concerning marriage and the home. The Law of Moses not only defines marriage, but also warns against fornication and adultery. In this chapter we study Deut. 22:13-29, where many of these warnings appear together.

In a modern law book, a detailed table of contents, bold-faced headings, indentation, different sizes of type, and other typographical devices show us the structure and organization of the laws. These devices do not appear in ancient books. In their place, symmetrical patterns of repetition show us where sections begin and end, and indicate their inner structure. Deuteronomy 22 is an excellent example of this technique.

- We begin by **surveying** the structure of the section that discusses fornication and adultery.
- When we understand this structure, we can study each law **detail**.
- The detailed study raises two **questions** that we seek to answer.
- Finally, we summarize some of the **principles** that we learn from the passage.

4.1 Survey of Deut. 22:13-29

There are five main laws in Deut. 22:13-29, beginning at verses 13, 22, 23, 25, and 28. Each law begins with the words "If a man ... " or "If a damsel ... ," and discusses three points:

1. the marital status of the woman;
2. an illicit physical union between the woman and some man, in which the man is always guilty and the woman is sometimes innocent and sometimes guilty;
3. the consequences for the woman (and the man, if he can be identified).

To make these ideas clear, we print the text with notes along the side showing where the paragraphs begin, and identifying the words and phrases that show the woman's status, her guilt or innocence, and the consequences.

First Paragraph, verses 13-21:

1. Woman married	If a man takes a wife and goes in unto her, and hates her, and lodges irresponsible charges, and brings up an evil name upon her, and says, "I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid," then the father of the damsel and her mother shall take and bring out
2. Woman innocent	the tokens of the damsel's virginity to the elders of the city in the gate. The damsel's father shall say to the elders, "I gave my daughter to this man as a wife, and he hates her, and look, he has lodged irresponsible charges." ... Then the elders of that city shall take that man and
3. Consequence	chastise him, and they shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver, and shall give them to the father of the damsel, ... and she shall be his wife. He may not put her away all his days .
2. Woman guilty	But if this thing is true , and the tokens of virginity are not found for the damsel, then they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall
3. Consequence	stone her with stones , so that she dies , and you shall put the evil away from among you.

Second Paragraph, verse 22:

1. Woman married	If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband ,
3. Consequence	then both of them shall die , both the man who lay with the woman, and the woman, and you shall put away the evil from Israel.

Third Paragraph, verses 23-24:

1. Woman engaged	If a damsel who is a virgin is betrothed to a man, and a man finds her in the city, and lies with her, then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city,
3. Consequence	and you shall stone them with stones, so that they die ,
2. Woman presumed guilty	the damsel, because she cried not , being in the city, and the man, because he has humbled his neighbor's wife, and you shall put away the evil from among you.

Fourth Paragraph, verses 25-27:

1. Woman engaged	But if a man finds a betrothed damsel in the field, and the man forces her, and lies with her,
3. Consequence	then only the man who lay with her shall die. Unto the damsel you shall do nothing .
2. Woman innocent	There is in the damsel no sin worthy of death For he found her in the field, and the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her.

Fifth Paragraph, verses 28-29:

1. Woman single	If a man finds a damsel who is a virgin, who is not betrothed , and lays hold on her, and lies with her, and they are found,
3. Consequence	then the man who lay with her shall give the damsel's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife. Because he has humbled her, he may not put her away all his days .

Table 1 summarizes the entire passage.

Table 1: Summary of Deuteronomy 22

Section	Woman's Status	Woman Guilty?	Consequences
22:13-21 The Wife Accused	Married		
15-19		No	Husband fined; may never put her away
20-21		Yes	Wife executed by stoning.
22:22 The Adulteress Discovered		Not Stated	Wife and illicit partner executed.
22:23-24 Defiled in the City	Engaged	Presumed Yes	Man and woman both executed.
22:25-27 Defiled in the Country		Presumed No	Only man executed; woman goes free.
22:28-29 Single Girl Defiled	Single	Not Stated	Man must marry woman; can never put her away.

4.2 A Closer Look

Now that we see how these laws are organized, we give our attention to each of them in more detail.

4.2.1 The Wife Accused, 22:13-21

The first case that Moses discusses is that of a man who accuses his wife of moral impurity before marriage:

I took this woman, and when I came to her, I found her not a maid (22:14).

The elders of the city must decide whether the woman is guilty or innocent. They base their decision on the "tokens of virginity" preserved by the wife's parents.

This is the only Bible passage to mention these tokens. Jewish custom of the first few centuries A.D., and much later Arab custom, suggests that they are linens from the nuptial bed, bearing blood stains that show that the husband is the bride's first partner. The marriage feast lasted several days beyond the wedding night, and the sheets were displayed to the guests, then carefully preserved by the bride's parents.

If the parents can produce these cloths, the elders (who would certainly have been present at the marriage feast) are expected to recognize them and pronounce the woman innocent. Then they chastise the man, fine him, and forbid him ever to put away his wife.

If, on the other hand, no one presents the tokens of virginity, the elders declare the woman guilty of the charge, and condemn her to death by stoning. This effectively dissolves the union, and the man is free to remarry.

Curiously, the text says nothing about the man with whom the woman committed fornication. It seems unfair to leave him unpunished, while bringing such a harsh judgment on the woman. We will discuss this problem after we have summarized the other cases.

4.2.2 The Adulteress Discovered, 22:22

The case of a married woman discovered with a man who is not her husband is short and to the point. They both die. Their sin is adultery, since the woman is married. There is no question either what happened, or who the man is, since they are discovered while together.

This is the law invoked by the scribes and Pharisees in John 8:1-11.

The scribes and Pharisees brought to [Jesus] a woman caught in adultery, and when they had set her in the midst, they say to him, "Master, we found this woman in the act, committing adultery. Moses in our Law commanded us to stone such women. Now: what do you say about her?" (John 8:3-5)

The Lord points out their own sinfulness, and they slink away, condemned by their own consciences. Then he asks the woman,

"Woman, where are your accusers? Has no man condemned you?" She said, "No man, Lord." Then Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:10-11).

Why does he pass over her sin so lightly? Moses requires both the man and the woman to die. There is no reason, if they are caught in the act, for only one to be accused. Yet the scribes and Pharisees bring only the woman, not the man, to Jesus. Without both parties, the law cannot be satisfied, even if the scribes stay to press charges. In fact, they abandon the case, and without the witnesses required by Moses (Deut. 19:15), even the woman cannot legally be prosecuted. The Lord's actions are completely in keeping with the Law of Moses.

4.2.3 Defiled in the City, 22:23-24

An engaged girl attacked in the city is executed, along with her attacker, *because she cried not*. These words tell us that if she does cry out, she will be acquitted. A person who cries for help in an ancient city can count on being heard. The houses stand close together, often sharing walls, and there is no motor traffic to drown out voices. If people do not learn about the event until later, they will reason, "No one heard her cry, therefore she did not cry, therefore she acquiesced in the sin, therefore she is guilty."

4.2.4 Defiled in the Country, 22:25-27

If a girl is not heard in the city, the law presumes she is guilty. In the country, on the other hand, she is presumed innocent. Far away from other people, she might well cry out without being heard.

In every section other than this one, the woman is either stoned if guilty (20-21, 22, 23-24) or guaranteed a secure marriage for life if innocent (15-19, 28-29). In this case, the victim is judged innocent, but nothing is said about her coming marriage.

People in Bible times care deeply about family lines and the legitimacy of their children. A man whose fiancée is molested away from the city may well believe that she is innocent, and still not wish to marry her. He might fear that if he did go through with the wedding, people would question who was the real father of his first child. Furthermore, though we understand the law's fairness in assuming that *the damsel cried, and there was none to save her*, the husband might be unable to escape a nagging question about her purity in the matter. Moses' law leaves the woman's fate open. She is not to be executed, but she may lose her fiancé.

This paragraph explains Joseph's behavior when Mary *was found with child of the Holy Ghost* (Matt. 1:18). At first he does not understand the Spirit's role, and can only conclude that she is involved in fornication. Matthew describes him as *a just man*, a man who lives according to the standards of God's law. The law condemns fornicators to death, yet Joseph resolves *to put Mary away privately*, and allow her to live. It is Deut. 22:25-27 that lets him spare her life. He assumes that she was forced against her will in the country, and so is innocent. To protect his own family line, he decides *to put her away*. He bears her no malice, and so will do this *privately*, to spare her the pain of public display.

4.2.5 A Single Girl Defiled, 22:28-29

If a man takes a single girl, he must support her for the rest of his life. He is not executed, as he would be if he violated an engaged girl. This difference in his fate points up an interesting contrast in the two situations.

When a man takes an engaged girl (verses 23-27), he seizes one who has been promised to someone else. He wrongs not only the girl, but also her betrothed. The severity of the death penalty reflects the double nature of his sin. A shotgun wedding is out of the question. That would only make his theft of her permanent.

When a man takes an unengaged girl (verses 28-29), he is left alive out of consideration for the girl. If he were stoned, he could not provide a living for her. Furthermore, because of his

actions, she may not be able to find another husband. The law spares his life so that he can support her.

4.3 Two Questions

These five laws lead to two questions that we now consider in more detail.

1. Why is no penalty specified for the first partner of the deceitful wife in verses 13-21?
2. What does the specific prohibition of divorce in verses 19 and 29 teach us about the Old Testament view of divorce in general?

4.3.1 The Question of the Unknown Penalty

We saw surprising extremes in the treatment of a man who molests a woman. In some cases he is put to death. In others, he is not. What is the difference?

Table 2 below gives a clue to the answer. For each paragraph, it shows

- the reference;
- a description of the episode;
- the time of the defilement, relative both to the engagement and to the marriage;
- and the penalties for the man and the woman.

Table 2: Another View of Deuteronomy 22

Verses	Episode	Time		Penalty	
		Engagement	Wedding	Man	Woman
20-21	Woman Accused by Husband	?	Before	?	Dies
22	Adulterers Discovered	After	After	Dies	
23-24	Defiled in the City		Before		Lives
25-27	Defiled in the Country				
28-29	A Single Girl Defiled	Before		Lives	Lives

The column headed "engagement" tells whether the sin happened before or after the girl is engaged. If we compare this column with the one that gives the penalty for the man, we see a pattern.

- In every case where a man defiles a woman after her engagement to someone else, he dies (verses 22, 23-24, and 25-27).
- If he defiles her before the engagement, he does not die (verses 28-29).
- In one case, his fate is unclear. This case is the only one in which we do not know whether the defilement took place before or after the engagement (verses 20-21).

The Man's Penalty — Imagine the elders officiating at the trial of the woman in verses 20-21. Her husband accuses her, and her parents are unable to produce evidence of her purity on the wedding night. The law is clear. They should condemn her to death by stoning. However, justice is not complete. The one with whom she has sinned ought also to answer for his sin. If the elders can persuade her to reveal his identity, what should they do with him?

Verses 20-21 do not say, but the other paragraphs do. Either she sinned with him after her engagement to her legal husband, or she did not. If there was an illicit union after the engagement, verses 23-24 and 25-27 condemn him to death. If, on the other hand, their fornication took place entirely before the engagement, verses 28-29 apply. Obviously, the attacker will not marry the woman, since she is to die. He is still liable, though, for the fine of fifty shekels.

Our first impression was that the law does not say what to do with the other man in the case of the woman accused by her husband. That impression is wrong. Though verses 20-21 do not mention her first partner, the other laws in the passage are clear. If the elders can learn his identity, one or another of them defines his fate.

The Woman's Penalty — We may still think that the law is unfair. Of the three paragraphs that tell us what to do with the attacker, two (verses 25-27 and 28-29) tell us that the woman is to live. Perhaps the condition her husband discovers results from one of these situations. Why is she freed there, but stoned in verses 20-21?

The woman's penalty is harsh not because she was violated, but because she concealed her condition from her fiance. She or her parents represented her to him as pure, when in fact she was not. He assumed he was marrying a virgin, but he was not. By deceiving him, she abuses the mutual trust and commitment that they make to one another in marriage. She violates the marriage covenant at the very moment she seals it. It is this faithlessness to the covenant, and not just physical fornication, that merits the death penalty.

4.3.2 The Question of "Never Put Away"

In two of the situations discussed in this section, Moses forbids the husband ever to put away his wife (verses 19 and 29). Some people feel that these prohibitions shed light on the status of divorce in general under the Law of Moses. Perhaps Moses must rule out divorce in these situations because they are exceptions to ordinary situations in which he approves it.

The Law of Moses contains no global condemnation of divorce. It also contains no blanket approval. The only references it makes to divorce are negative, either forbidding it or restricting those who have been divorced.

On the one hand, the Pentateuch does not give us grounds to read the Lord Jesus' explicit prohibition of divorce back into early Israelite society. On the other hand, the prophet Malachi accuses Israel of "profan[ing] the covenant of our fathers" (2:10), and backs up his accusation by describing marital abuses, particularly divorce. Malachi clearly sees divorce as contrary to "the covenant of our fathers," which is either the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai through Moses or the earlier covenant with Abraham. We cannot accuse the prophet Malachi of reading back New Testament teaching into the Old Testament, and his reference to the Law as the basis for his teaching makes it unlikely that he is suggesting a different standard from that of the Law.

Moses does not tell us in general terms what God thinks of divorce. We do know that the Law never approves it explicitly, and does condemn some specific instances of it. If the Law approves of divorce in general, then it differs not only from the New Testament but also from later portions of the Old Testament. It seems preferable to understand that Israel at Sinai has

problems that are far more pressing than divorce, and so the Law focuses on these questions, treating divorce only in specific situations.

The argument that prohibiting divorce in some situations approves it in all others is only valid if we assume that Moses' Law is exhaustive. Clearly, it is not. What it condemns explicitly, we know is wrong. What it commands explicitly, we know is right. There are some things, including divorce in general, that it neither condemns nor commands. On these subjects we must await the revelation of later Scriptures. When that revelation comes, it clearly condemns divorce, and we should not soften that condemnation by pretending that the silence of earlier Scriptures contradicts it.

4.4 Two Important Principles

Deuteronomy 22 gives us two principles of the Mosaic Law, principles that will be important in our later study.

4.4.1 Why were Marriages Terminated?

Moses' Law does specify circumstances when a marriage should be terminated. When a man or woman commits adultery, or when an unmarried girl involved in fornication hides this from her betrothed until after the wedding, Moses requires an end to the marriage.

The reason for ending the marriage is always moral impurity. There is no mention of "incompatibility," "mental cruelty," or "domestic violence." In fact, when a husband accuses his innocent wife, we can imagine that their relation is already very poor. Still, the Law does not separate them, but insists that they stay together.

4.4.2 How did the Law Terminate Marriages?

The means by which the Law terminates a marriage is death by stoning. This verdict is very severe to the guilty, but unlike modern divorces, it leaves no nagging questions about whether the innocent spouse may remarry. The survivor is not divorced, but widowed. The old union is over and done as only death can make it.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How is Deuteronomy 22 organized?
2. How are the rules governing married people like those governing the engaged?
3. How are the rules for married and engaged people different?
4. How does Deuteronomy 22 illustrate John 8?
5. How does it illustrate Matthew 1?
6. The situation in Deut. 22:13-21 could result from actions like those in 22:25-27. Why is the penalty different?
7. What grounds does the Law of Moses recognize for ending a marriage?
8. How is a marriage terminated?
9. What is the Law's attitude in general toward "putting away"?

CHAPTER 5 THE LAW OF MOSES AND DIVORCE

In the last chapter we learned that the Old Testament Law specifies capital punishment, not divorce, as the penalty for fornication and adultery. Still, there is divorce in ancient Israel. Legislation concerning it appears in Deuteronomy 24, which twice in four verses describes a man who writes a "certificate of divorce," gives it to his wife, and sends her out of his house.

Since before the time of Christ, interpreters of Deut. 24:1-4 have debated whether or not it sanctions divorce. In this chapter,

- we will summarize the two main views.
- Then, to help us choose between them, we will discuss
 - the grammatical structure of the text;
 - certain contradictions that arise in one interpretation;
- Moses' explanation of the law; and
- Jeremiah's use of the law in Jer. 3:1.

5.1 Two Views of Deut. 24:1-4

There are two different ways to interpret Moses' instructions about divorce. One interpretation tells people how to divorce one another. It **commands** divorce. The other recognizes that divorce, like murder and theft, is an unfortunate part of life, and tells people how to behave if it happens. It **allows for** divorce.

This law, like many in Deuteronomy, is a conditional statement. It has the form, "IF [or WHEN] someone does something, THEN you should do something." Both interpretations recognize the "if-then" structure of the law. They differ on how many "if-then" statements the law contains.

The translation of Deut. 24:1-4 in the Authorized Version identifies three "if-then" or "when-then" pairs, followed by an explanation. It sees three laws in the passage, so we call it the "three law interpretation." Another translation of the passage is possible. This translation sees only a single instruction and its explanation in the passage. We call it the "one law interpretation." Table 3 compares the three law interpretation (on the left) with the one law interpretation (on the right).

In the three law interpretation, each of the three conditions is a distinct instruction.

1. The first condition provides that if a woman does not please her husband, he may "write her a bill of divorcement [certificate of divorce], and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house" (verse 1). This law explicitly authorizes divorce.
2. The second condition permits a woman so divorced to marry another man (verse 2).
3. The third condition forbids a woman who is divorced, remarried, and then divorced or widowed to return to the first husband, for that would be a particularly heinous sin (verses 3-4).

So the three law interpretation permits divorce and remarriage under some circumstances.

Table 3: Two Interpretations of Deut. 24:1-4

Three Law Interpretation	One Law Interpretation
First Law, 24:1	One Law, 1-4a
When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass	When a man has taken a wife, and married her, and it happens,
that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her,	if she does not find favor in his eyes, because he has found some uncleanness in her,
then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house.	and he writes her a certificate of divorce, and gives it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,
Second Law, 24:2	
And when she is departed out of his house,	and she departs out of his house,
[then] she may go and be another man's wife.	and goes and becomes another man's wife,
Third law, 24:3-4a	
And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house,	and the latter husband hates her, and writes her a certificate of divorce, and gives it in her hand, and sends her out of his house,
or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife,	or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife,
[then] her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled.	then her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled.
The Explanation, 24:4b	
For that is abomination before the Lord, and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.	For that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not cause the land to sin, the land that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance.

The one law interpretation recognizes that divorce and remarriage happen, just as Deuteronomy 22 recognizes that fornication happens. It does not approve the first divorce, or the remarriage, or the second divorce, any more than Deuteronomy 22 approves fornication. Like Deuteronomy 22, it tells what God wants people to do if these unfortunate events occur.

5.2 Choosing Between the Views

The interpretation of Deuteronomy 24 that we choose makes a great deal of difference to how we view divorce and remarriage. Five insights show that the one law interpretation, the one that does not approve of divorce and remarriage, is correct.

1. The one law interpretation is the **more natural translation** of the Hebrew text.
2. The three law interpretation leads to **contradictions** among the three laws.
3. The **explanation** "For that is abomination before the Lord ..." (verse 4) fits well with the one law interpretation.
4. **Jeremiah** cites the passage in a way that presumes the one law interpretation.
5. The **Lord Jesus** endorses the one law interpretation in the Gospels.

We study the first four of these insights in the remainder of this section, and the fifth in Chapter 10.

5.2.1 The Grammar of Deut. 24:1-4

The simplest reading of Deut. 24:1-4 is as one law rather than three. The prophet Jeremiah alludes to this passage in his prophecy. He knows biblical Hebrew much better than any modern scholar, for he speaks it as his native tongue. It is interesting that he paraphrases the law as a single command, not as three:

If a man puts away his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man's, shall he return unto her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? (Jer. 3:1)

In English, the words "if" (or "when") and "then" show the difference between the one law interpretation and the three law interpretation. In Hebrew, the difference between a condition (an "if-then" sentence) and an ordinary sentence is much more subtle. Hebrew does have several words for "if," but most conditions do not use a special word to introduce the "then" clause. Other features, such as word order or verb tense, sometimes show where the "if" stops and the "then" begins. It is even possible to have a condition in which the "if" clause and the "then" clause can be distinguished only by meaning. Perhaps the spoken language marked these with special intonation, but we cannot detect this from our written text.

Hebrew words for "if" occur three times in Deut. 24:1-4, but they do not correspond to the three conditions in the three law interpretation. The first occurs at the beginning of 24:1, "when a man takes a wife" The second is in the middle of 24:1, "if she does not find favor in his eyes" The third is in 24:3, "when the latter husband dies" There is no "if" at the beginning of 24:2 or 24:3. Furthermore, of the three "then"s required by the three law interpretation, only the one at the beginning of 24:4 corresponds to a distinctive Hebrew construction.

Hebrew conditions are not always marked clearly. The three law interpretation is not impossible. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest that it is correct. We will see it there only if we bring it with us to the text. If we follow only the clues that the text gives us, we will read 24:1-3 as one long "if" and 24:4a as the "then."

5.2.2 Three Paradoxical Laws

Not only is the one law interpretation simpler linguistically than the three law interpretation, but it also avoids certain contradictions that arise among the three laws of the three law interpretation.

The three laws of the three law interpretation are:

1. A man may divorce his wife, thus ending their marriage (verse 1).
2. A divorced woman may marry someone else (verse 2).
3. If anything happens to the second marriage, the woman may not return to the first husband, because she is defiled (verses 3,4).

The first law, allowing divorce, leads logically to the second law, allowing marriage to someone else. If the first marriage is really gone, there can be no objection to remarriage. The first law and the third, though, are in conflict, as are the second and the third.

A Divorce that Doesn't Work.—The first law seems to conflict with the third law, forbidding reconciliation of the first couple. If the first marriage is really gone, there is no relationship between the woman and her first husband. He and she should be like any other man and woman in Israel. If the second husband dies and they wish to remarry, they should be able to marry one another as well as anybody else. Under the three law interpretation, they may marry other people, but not one another. Some sort of tie remains between the woman and her first husband. The divorce of verse 1 cannot obliterate this relationship.

If we think Deut. 24:1 sanctions divorce as a way to undo marriage, then 24:4a is strange, for it implies that the marriage is not completely undone after all.

A Marriage that Defiles.—The second and third laws also conflict. The second law expressly permits the woman to remarry, but the third law says that she is "defiled" as a result of remarrying.

"Defiled" in this context indicates that entering the second marriage is a sexual sin. Leviticus 18 uses the word to describe the sexual sins of the Canaanites.

*You shall not lie carnally with your neighbor's wife, to **defile** yourself with her (Lev. 18:20).*

*Do not **defile yourselves** in any of these things, for in all these things the nations are **defiled**, the nations that I cast out from before you (Lev. 18:24).*

1. *You shall **keep** my ordinance, so that you do not commit any of the abominable customs that were committed before you, and so that you do not **defile yourselves** in them (Lev. 18:30).*

In the three law interpretation, the third law says that the wife defiles herself in the second marriage, and thus views the consummation of that marriage as sexual sin. Yet the second law explicitly allows her to remarry. Thus the second law and the third law, like the first law and the third law, are contradictory.

If there are three laws in Deut. 24:1-4, they contradict one another. The one law interpretation has no such problem. It sanctions neither divorce nor remarriage, but only tells what to do in one particular combination of these events.

5.2.3 How does Moses explain the Law?

Both interpretations of Deut. 24:1-4 agree that the law forbids the reconciliation of a divorced couple if the wife has been married to someone else during the period of the divorce. The passage itself offers an explanation for this prohibition.

For that is an abomination before the Lord, and you shall not cause the land to sin, the land that the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance (Deut. 24:46).

This explanation is the third piece of evidence that helps us choose between the interpretations.

Under the three law interpretation, the explanation is as confusing as are the contradictions among the laws. If divorce really is possible, if people can really dissolve a marriage, why should a later reconciliation be "an abomination before the Lord?" By this interpretation, both the first and the second marriage are gone. They should not have any effect on remarriage.

The explanation does fit well with the one law interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. The first verse is not God's way to dissolve a marriage, but only men's attempt to do so. People cannot completely untie the knot that God has tied. A special relationship remains between man and

wife, in spite of their best efforts to dissolve it. It is the persistence of this special relationship that makes reconciliation so abominable.

The explanation in Deut. 24:4 is the only verse in the Bible that uses the word "sinning" to describe "the land." Jeremiah once again can help us understand this law, for he uses a synonym when he paraphrases it: "Shall not that land be greatly **polluted**?" (Jer. 3:1). Among other passages, Num. 35:31-33 talks about the pollution of the land. Though the specific causes of the pollution are different in Numbers and in Deuteronomy, both passages talk about averting pollution. The greater detail in Numbers can help us understand Deuteronomy.

Murder Also "Pollutes the Land" — In Numbers 35, God tells the nation Israel how to judge and punish the crime of murder. The conclusion of this chapter talks about polluting the land.

*You shall take no atonement for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death. ... So you shall not **pollute** the land where you are, for blood **pollutes** the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it (Num. 35:31,33).*

Blood shed by murder "pollutes the land." The damage can be reversed, by punishing the murderer. Otherwise, the pollution remains.

Ever since the time of Noah, the penalty for murder is death. God tells Noah,

Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed (Gen. 9:6).

Under Moses, the responsibility for discharging this judgment falls on the relatives of the dead man. One of them, called "the avenger of blood" in Numbers 35, seeks out the killer to slay him. The killer, in turn, flees to a "city of refuge" for protection until the elders of his home city extradite him for trial (Deut. 19:12). If the trial finds that the killing was accidental, he returns to the city of refuge, safe from the avenger of blood. But if he is guilty, he is delivered to the avenger of blood for execution.

The law of murder makes the avenger of blood responsible for preventing pollution of the land, by executing the murderer. There is no provision for the avenger of blood to forgive the murderer. More is at stake than a personal vendetta between murderer and victim. God's law has been broken, and it is God's judgment, not just personal vengeance, that the avenger must execute. Whatever the avenger's personal feelings toward the murderer, he has a duty to perform as God's minister.

How is Adultery like Murder? — Adultery, as well as murder, "pollutes the land:"

She polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees (Jer. 3:9).

Under the one law interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, divorce and remarriage is really adultery, for the divorce has no divine sanction, but is entirely man-made. In spite of the "certificate of divorce" that the first husband gives the woman in Deut. 24:1, she is still his wife. When she marries the second man, she commits adultery against the first, and threatens the land with pollution.

Numbers 35 shows that the pollution that sin brings on the land can be removed if the sin is judged. In the case of murder, the prosecutor is the avenger of blood. There is also a prosecutor for the sin of adultery. It is the first husband. Throughout the Law of Moses, he is the one who must bring charges against an adulterous wife. In Deut. 22:13-21, he accuses her of premarital

impurity. In Num. 5:11-31, he accuses her of unfaithfulness after marriage. The analogy of Numbers 35 suggests that in both cases he is not only defending his own honor, but also enforcing God's law.

As with murder, the judgment on adultery must not be bypassed, or the land will remain polluted. It is not just a question of the relationship between the man and his wife, but of the discharge of God's law among his subjects. Certainly, it is unlikely that the first husband will accuse his wife of adultery after divorcing her, and less likely that any society that recognizes the divorce will accept the charges. Still, before God, the husband is responsible to prosecute his wife's sin. If he drops the charges, the land remains defiled, for he has abandoned his responsibility to execute God's justice.

Now the reasoning behind the law of reconciliation is clear. A husband may take back his divorced wife if she has not remarried, for the divorce is only a man-made institution and does not change their union in God's eyes. However, once she marries someone else, she commits adultery against her first husband. Now he is responsible to prosecute her sin. If he accepts her back, he effectively pardons the sin. Yet he has no authority to pardon her, for it is God's law, not his, that demands satisfaction. By refusing to satisfy that law, he leaves the land polluted with adultery.

The explanation that Moses gives for Deut. 24:1-4 thus presents a paradox if the passage sanctions divorce. If the passage only forbids reconciliation, the explanation makes sense.

5.2.4 How does Jeremiah use this law?

The prophet Jeremiah cites Deut. 24:1-4 when he condemns Judah for idolatry, a condition he describes vividly as spiritual adultery. He writes,

"They say,

'If a man sends out his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again?

Would not that land be greatly polluted?'

In your case, you have played the harlot with many lovers, and would you now return to me?" says the Lord (Jer. 3:1).

Jeremiah argues that if the law forbids reunion with one's spouse after adultery with even a single partner, Judah can hardly expect the Lord to welcome her back after she has been unfaithful with many lovers. For the purposes of our discussion, the form in which he cites the law is important. He paraphrases the law as a single long condition, followed by a conclusion, which he expresses as a question, "May he return to her again?" This question clearly expects a negative answer. Under the conditions described, restoration is impossible. That is, Jeremiah reads the law, not as three separate instructions, but as a single law. In our terms, he follows the "one law interpretation."

5.2.5 One Law or Three?

It is encouraging when we can establish the meaning of a passage of scripture "in the mouth of two or three witnesses." In our case, we have found four witnesses to the one law interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4, with a fifth to come in Chapter 10. Of the two main interpretations of the passage, the one law interpretation is more natural grammatically, avoids contradictions to which

the other interpretation leads, better fits the explanation that Moses gives for the law, and is consistent with Jeremiah's paraphrase. We will soon see that the Lord Jesus also follows the one law interpretation.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please paraphrase Deut. 24:1-4 in two different ways, illustrating the two conflicting interpretations of the passage.
2. Which interpretation is smoother grammatically?
3. What paradox arises if Deuteronomy 24 sanctions divorce?
4. Please compare the law of reconciliation with the law of murder with respect to the initial offense, the prosecutor, and why the prosecutor cannot pardon the offender.
5. Which interpretation of Deut. 24:1-4 does Jeremiah's use of the passage support, and why?
6. How would you counsel a divorced couple who wish to reunite?

NOTES

5.3 The Implications of "Defiled" in Deut. 24:3

Yaron 1966:8 insists that "defiled" in verse 3 does not describe the second marriage as adulterous, but is simply a reference to the consummation of that marriage as putting the woman "finally beyond the reach of her first husband." His explanation is very abbreviated, but seems to allude to the fact that even a legitimate marriage (as he considers the second marriage to be) brings impurity under the Law:

As for a woman with whom a man lies with seed of copulation, they shall wash in water, and they shall be defiled until the evening (Lev. 15:18).

This note argues that "defiled" in Deut. 24:4 means more than this temporary ceremonial impurity, because of the duration of the defilement and the existence of clearer alternatives for describing the second union.

The defilement of Lev. 15:18 lasts only one day. The defilement of Deut. 24:4 persists even after the death of the second husband. They thus seem to be two different kinds of defilement.

There are clearer ways for the law to speak of the consummation of the second marriage than an obscure reference to Lev. 15:18. Hebrew has at least four words denoting copulation.

1. "To ravish" is so direct that Jewish scribes living after the time of Christ systematically change it to another verb, "to lie with."
2. "To lie with" indicates copulation, either legitimate or illegitimate, either with or without the consent of both parties. It occurs in Gen. 39:7, 12, 14; 30:15, 16; 2 Sam. 11:11; and many other times.
3. "To humble" usually describes a rape, as in Judg. 19:24 and 2 Sam. 13:12,14. It is the word that some versions render "defile" in Gen. 34:2.
4. "To know" is used frequently of the physical union of married couples (Gen. 4:1, 17, 25). Only once (Judg. 19:25) does it describe a situation where one participant does not consent to the union.

If the function of the word "defiled" in Deut. 24:4 is simply to refer to the consummation of a second legitimate marriage, either "to know" or "to lie with" would be a much clearer term.

The defilement of the second marriage is more than the ceremonial result of lawful union. A much better parallel seems to be the uses of "to defile" in Leviticus 18, which we have summarized in the body of the chapter.

5.4 Wenham's Explanation of Deut. 24

I explain Deut. 24:1-4 as forbidding reconciliation after remarriage on the grounds that the first husband has a divine duty to prosecute his remarried wife for adultery. This interpretation seems to be a new addition to the collection of several that have grown up around the passage. (For summaries of earlier views see Yaron 1966; Heth 1982:52-56.) The latest view to be expounded, and one favored by several recent writers (Steele and Ryrie 1983:26-27; Kaiser 1983:202-203) is that proposed by Gordon Wenham 1979. He observes that the reasons given in Deut. 24:4 for

prohibiting the remarriage are characteristic of the prohibitions against incest in Leviticus 18 and 20. He argues that marriage binds a man and woman into a relationship as strong as that between parent and child, a virtual blood relationship. "The result is paradoxical. A man may not remarry his former wife, because his first marriage to her made her into one of his closest relatives" (Wenham 1979:40), and the reconciliation would therefore be incestuous.

Wenham's view is creative, and shows a sensitivity to the biblical view of the depth of the marriage bond, but there is a problem. Deuteronomy 24 assumes that some persisting relationship between the first husband and his wife prohibits reconciliation after she remarries. This relationship must result from the intervening remarriage, since without the remarriage reconciliation is not forbidden. Wenham argues that the relationship in question is the virtual blood bond resulting from the first marriage. But this bond exists whether or not the woman remarries. If it is strong enough to cause incest, then it should prevent reconciliation, whether or not the woman has remarried. In fact, it should prevent any union between man and wife after the marriage has been consummated, for the incest laws of Leviticus 18 and 20 directly forbid **intercourse**, not just marriage, with one's close relatives.

But it is patently **not** incestuous for a man and his wife to have intercourse, and there is no evidence whatsoever that reconciliation after divorce in the absence of an intervening marriage is considered incest. The relationship in view in Deuteronomy 24 is caused, not by marriage alone, nor by marriage and divorce, but by marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The bond identified by Wenham does not meet this requirement. The relation between a husband and his unfaithful wife does.

5.5 Two Questions on Jer. 3:1

Our discussion of Jer. 3:1 invites an important question. If Moses' law forbids Judah, as the Lord's unfaithful wife, from returning to him, how can the Lord later promise to restore the nation (as in Jer. 23:5-8; 24:6-7; and many other places)?

We might think that God is not bound by his own laws, since he made them in the first place. This explanation, while plausible at first glance, is probably not correct. The New Testament emphasizes the importance of Christ's fulfilling the Law for his people, and bearing their penalty in their place. If it were consistent with God's character for him simply to waive his own laws, then the imputation of our sin to Christ and of his righteousness to us would be unnecessary. There would be no need for God to sacrifice his Son to procure our forgiveness, if he could simply waive the laws that we have violated.

In fact, the contrast between what the law would allow and the restoration promised later in Jeremiah, emphasizes the wonder and mystery of God's forgiveness. A human husband cannot restore his wife because he cannot forgive the offense against God's Law. God does forgive repentant sinners. This truth is so characteristic of the Lord that he proclaims it as part of his name to Moses in Exod. 34:6,7:

The LORD, the LORD, a God . . . forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

Because God can forgive the sin, he can restore Israel to himself.

The Old Testament teaches clearly enough **that** God forgives sin, but we must wait until the New Testament to learn in full detail **how** he is able to forgive without compromising his own

holiness. There we find that God in Christ has himself carried his people's guilt and borne their punishment for them. The Old Testament hints of this in the very word "forgive," for it is the same word translated "bear" in expressions like "he shall bear his iniquity" (Lev. 5:1,17). When God forgives sin, he himself shoulders its burden, and ultimately discharges it on Calvary.

Though God, as the author of forgiveness, can restore his wife, the original law is not suspended or revoked. The law itself, in Exod. 34:7, recognizes that God can forgive, and this revelation antedates Deut. 24:1-4. The sacrifices of the Law could never convey a clear conscience (Heb. 9:9; 10:1,2), but Psalm 32 clearly shows that those whose faith went beyond the Law could know the blessedness of forgiven sin. Still, the fact of God's forgiveness does not remove the physical penalties that the Law imposes for sin, or relieve God's people of the need to obey the Law.

The New Testament does not revoke this particular law, just as in general it retains the Old Testament's teachings about marriage. This law thus provides guidance to believers who may have stumbled in the area of divorce and remarriage. A divorced couple may be reconciled if neither has remarried. If a remarriage has intervened, they may not be reconciled, even if the second spouse has died. In particular, this law offers a direct refutation to the suggestion sometimes heard that believers in second marriages should dissolve them and return to their original spouses. We will consider the dissolution of second marriages in more detail in Chapter 14, but this law explicitly forbids a restoration of the first marriage under any circumstances.

CHAPTER 6 THE LAW OF MOSES AND CONCUBINAGE

We have studied two of Moses' laws about divorce. Deuteronomy 22 explicitly forbids divorce in some specific cases. Deuteronomy 24 regulates remarriage after divorce. Both statements recognize the existence of divorce in Israelite culture, but do not endorse it. Instead, they make divorce more difficult and less palatable than it would be otherwise.

In contrast, two other texts in Israel's law code, Exod. 21:7-11 and Deut. 21:10-14, tell how a man should put out a woman who does not please him. Such instruction does more than recognize that people divorce each other. It tells them how to do it. How can we reconcile these texts with the opposition to divorce reflected in Deuteronomy 22 and 24? What are their implications for the believer's conduct today? To answer these questions, we examine each passage in detail, observing common features that occur in both of them.

6.1 Some Recurring Themes

The two passages we will study share three important features.

1. Both passages deal with legitimate unions, not fornication. They use some of the special words and expressions for marriage that we studied in the notes to Chapter 3.
2. The women in both cases are slaves, and thus of a lower social class than their partners. In the notes, we show that Israelite society distinguishes wives who are slaves from other wives, often using the special word "concubine" to describe them. This peculiar status appears to be the reason that these unions are so easily broken.
3. Though the union with a concubine is more tenuous than that with a full wife, the point of both laws is not to weaken the bond, but to strengthen it. The laws do not teach that slaves are easier to discard than free women, but that married slaves are harder to discard than unmarried ones.

6.2 The Law of the Hebrew Concubine

The first law describes a free-born female Israelite whose father has sold her as a servant, and whose owner has taken her as a wife either for himself or for his son.

And if a man sells his daughter as a handmaid, she shall not go out as the menservants go out. If she should be displeasing to her master, who appointed her for himself, then he shall cause her to be redeemed. To an unfamiliar people he shall have no authority to sell her, in dealing treacherously with her.

And if he should appoint her for his son, he shall deal with her after the manner of daughters. If he takes another for him, her meat, her clothing, and her ointment he shall not diminish. And if he does not do these three for her, she shall go out gratis, without charge (Exodus 21:7-11).

The law has three provisions, each specifying how the relation between the master and the servant may end. .

1. In contrast to ordinary Israelite servitude, the relation does not expire automatically after six years.

2. The woman may not be sold out of her husband's family. She may only be "redeemed" and thus restored to her original family.
3. If she is abused, she wins her freedom at no cost.

6.2.1 Expiration of Indenture

The words, "She shall not go out as the menservants do," allude to the law in Exod. 21:1-6, just before this law. The earlier law shows that one Israelite cannot own another absolutely. The servitude is more like an indenture, with a fixed term.

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve for six years, and in the seventh he shall go out as a free man, gratis (Exodus 21:1).

After six years, the master must set the servant free, unless the servant wishes to remain in his master's household.

In general, the principle of release after six years applies to both men and women servants, as Deut. 15:12 shows. The law we are studying now gives one exception to the six year release. If a man "appoints" his female servant for himself or his son, she "shall not go out as the menservants do" (Exod. 21:7), "in the seventh [year]" (Exod. 21:1). A man may not take advantage of a female servant, and then discard her. If he takes her, he elevates her from servant to family member. Servants leave after six years. Members of the family are permanent.

6.2.2 Resale

The second paragraph of the law tells how the master may and may not regain his investment if the servant does not please him. He may "cause her to be redeemed," but not "sell her to an unfamiliar people," that is, out of the family.

The owner cannot sell his concubine out of the family, for by doing so he would "deal treacherously with her." The phrase "deal treacherously" translates the Hebrew verb describing breach of covenant that we considered in Chapter 3. The relation between the master and his servant involves a covenant, which in this context is probably the marriage covenant. Most translations of this law suggest that because the covenant has been broken previously, the master cannot sell her. As we discuss in the notes, the Hebrew construction suggests that it is the act of selling that breaks the covenant. By marrying the girl, the master has elevated her above her former status. To sell her as a common chattel would betray that commitment.

The law does allow the man to regain his investment, by "caus[ing] her to be redeemed." Redemption of a servant is like a sale in that money is paid to remove the servant from an owner's possession. It differs from a sale in two ways. In a sale, the servant becomes the property of the person who paid the previous owner, and the purchaser can be anybody. In redemption, the purchaser is someone with an original claim to the servant, and the servant becomes free. The intent seems to be that the girl's father repays the purchase price he received for his daughter, and she returns to his home as a free person.

This provision gives us a clearer view of the girl's status. Her union with the master has made her more than a common slave, so that she cannot be sold. From the master's point of view she still has a value, and the law allows him to regain his funds if her family by birth will redeem her.

6.2.3 Emancipation

If the owner is unhappy with his concubine and her family cannot afford to redeem her, he must continue to provide for her. If he neglects her, she wins her freedom without any repayment to her owner.

6.2.4 Summary

The law of the Hebrew concubine in Exodus 21 shows clearly the three features we anticipated as we began.

1. The legitimacy of the union is implied by the statement that the husband is liable for breach of covenant if he sells his concubine out of the family.
2. The woman is a slave, for she is "sold" as a "handmaid."
3. The emphasis of the law is not on how easy it is to put away a slave, but on the restrictions the master must accept if he takes her as his concubine. He cannot abuse her and discard her, just because she is his property. A covenant exists between them, and he must abide by it.

A close parallel to the law of the Hebrew concubine appears in Leviticus 19:20.

As for a man who lies carnally with a woman, she being a handmaid appointed for a[nother] man, not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her: there shall be an investigation. They shall not be put to death, because she was not free.

- In both cases, the woman is a servant with some sort of relation to a man. Leviticus does not state that he is her master, but because she is a handmaid, we expect that the relation is either with him or with someone approved by him (such as the son of Exodus 21:9).
- In both cases, the relation can be ended either by redemption or by outright release.

The passage enhances our understanding of Exodus 21:7-11 by illustrating how the relation of man and concubine is inferior to that of man and full wife. What is to be done with a man who takes a woman to whom he is not married? If she is single, Deuteronomy 22:28-29 requires him to marry her. If she is engaged or married, Deuteronomy 22:22-27 requires at least the man to die. In this case, though, neither law applies, "because she was not free." She belongs to someone else, so the seducer may not marry her. But the offense is not serious enough to warrant death. The seducer offers a trespass offering (Leviticus 19:21), and is forgiven.

6.3 The Law of the Captive Concubine

The second law that seems to allow divorce describes a female prisoner of war whose captor wants her as his concubine. In the first law the woman is an Israelite, but here a Gentile woman is in focus.

It may happen that you go out to war against your enemies, and the LORD your God delivers them into your hand, and you take them captive, and you see among the captives an attractive woman, and you desire her, and you take her to yourself as a wife, and you bring her into your house. Then she will shave her head, and do her nails, and put off the garment of her captivity from upon her, and sit in your house, and weep for her father and her mother for a month. After this, perhaps you go in unto

her, and become her husband, and she becomes your wife. Now, if you do not take pleasure in her, you may send her away according to her desire. But you must not sell her for money, nor treat her abusively, because you have humbled her (Deuteronomy 21:10-14).

According to the customs of the Ancient Near East, prisoners of war ordinarily became slaves of their captors. Israel's Law provides that a female captive whose master takes her as his concubine is thereby elevated above the status of an ordinary slave, just as is the servant in Exodus 21. Her master has "humbled her." That is, they have been united physically. Therefore he may no longer dispose of her as a piece of property.

The question of redemption does not arise. The captor has no financial investment in her. Besides, because she is a foreigner whose relatives have been slain, it is unlikely that he could find a redeemer for her. His only alternative to living with her is to set her free. Even this action is restricted "according to her desire." As a foreigner, she might not want to be independent in Israel. The wording of the law suggests that in this case her master might be compelled to continue to provide for her.

This law exhibits the same three characteristics we saw in Exodus 21.

1. The expressions "you take her to yourself as a wife" and "you ... be her husband, and she shall become your wife" are formal idioms for marriage.
2. The woman's status as a slave is a direct consequence of her being a prisoner of war.
3. The law does not grant additional liberties to the husband because his partner is a slave, but imposes restrictions on his disposition of her that would not apply if she were not his concubine.

6.4 Slave-Wives and Divorce

We turned our attention to Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 21 because these passages seem to authorize dissolution of marriages. We now understand that the relationships in view in these laws are of a special kind that does not arise in modern Western society.

Our fundamental insight is that because the women in view are slaves, their relationships with their masters are concubinage and not full marriage. The ease with which these unions are broken does not contradict the high regard for marriage reflected in Deuteronomy 22 and 24, since two different relations are in view. Deuteronomy 22 and 24 consider a full marriage. God has joined the partners together, so not even a formal divorce can dissolve their union in his eyes. Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 21 describe concubinage, a union distinguished by the culture from full marriage. This union is thus man-made, so man can sever it.

Because concubinage has no legal status in Western culture, these laws offer no precedent for modern divorces. In fact, if anything, they argue against divorce. Contrasted with the pagan standards of the day, Moses' Law greatly restricts the husband's tyranny over his concubine. These decrees are steps away from casual liaisons and toward fuller commitment, even in the context of slavery.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What general attitude toward the dissolution of marriage do Deuteronomy 22 and 24 reflect?

2. How do Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 21 differ from this?
3. What three features characterize both of these laws?

NOTES

6.5 The Translation of Exod. 21:8

The translation of Exod. 21:8,10 in the text differs from most English translations in three details: the rendering of the phrase **עַם נִכְרִי**, the handling of the infinitive construct phrase with **בִּ** at the end of 21:8, and the interpretation of the third item in 21:10 that the master is obligated to provide for her (AV “duty of marriage”).

6.5.1 The "Unfamiliar People"

Most translations render **עַם נִכְרִי** as "foreign people" or "foreign nation," implying that the husband can sell his concubine as long as he sells her to an Israelite and not to a foreigner. This interpretation seems unlikely on three grounds.

1. The verse draws a contrast between selling the woman and causing her to be redeemed, not between selling her to one group as opposed to another. Redemption (פְּדוּתָהּ) always involves an original owner's regaining possession of something by offering a payment of some sort. In the context, the original owner would be the woman's father (verse 7), who could return the purchase price and bring his daughter home. The law allows redemption by the woman's family, but forbids selling her to **עַם נִכְרִי**. The logical contrast to her family is anybody else, not just non-Israelites.
2. In the parallel text Lev. 19:20, the two conditions that could remove a woman from the position of concubine are redemption and release. There is no mention of sale to anyone, Israelite or not.
3. The second law protects a foreign captive concubine from being sold to anybody, not just from being sold to a non-Israelite. She can no longer be traded as a common chattel. If the first law permits the husband to sell his concubine at all, we are drawn to the strange conclusion that the Law of Moses offers greater protection to foreign concubines than to Israelite ones.

The precise expression **עַם נִכְרִי** appears nowhere else in the Old Testament. **עַם** need not denote a nation, but can refer to the citizens of a locality (for example, in Gen. 19:4; 1 Sam. 9:12,13; and Jer. 29:16,25), and the feminine of **נִכְרִי** can refer to someone from another family, as in the use of the feminine form for a harlot, a woman who is "alien" to a man because she is not his proper wife. The overall expression seems appropriate to describe anyone not in either of the woman's two families (the families of her father and of her husband). The phrase is thus not restrictive ("he may sell her, but not to a foreigner"), but definitive ("he may not sell her, thus removing her from her own people").

6.5.2 The Connection of "Deal Treacherously"

The infinitive construct phrase with **בִּ** at the end of 21:8, **בְּבִגְדוֹ-בָּהּ**, is universally translated as a causal clause, "since he has dealt treacherously with her," explaining why the husband cannot

sell her. I have rendered it as specifying more precisely what would be involved in selling her: by doing so he would be dealing treacherously. Two arguments show why this rendering is preferable.

1. On close examination, other cases of כִּי with the infinitive construct commonly cited as "causal" are not clearly causal. For instance, R. Williams 1967:pars.247,534 exhibits Exod. 33:16 and 1 Kings 18:18 as examples of this usage. But consider these citations more closely.

*And how [literally **in what**] then shall it be known that I have found favor in your eyes, I and your people? Is it not **in your going** with us? (Exodus 33:16)*

The causal interpretation would paraphrase the emphasized phrase, "because you are going with us." However, the "in" in the phrase is an echo of the same preposition in the Hebrew idiom "in what," at the beginning of the verse. Moses asks, "How shall it be known?", not "Why shall it be known?". The answer gives a means, not a cause.

*And he said, "I have not troubled Israel, but you and your father's house [have], **in your forsaking** the LORD's commandments, and going after the Baals (1 Kings 18:18).*

Elijah accuses Ahab of troubling Israel. The emphasized phrase does not describe why Ahab has troubled Israel, but how he has done it. Forsaking the Lord's commandments does not lead up to the troubling of Israel, but is the very substance of the troubling. The use of כִּי with the infinitive construct here specifies more closely the meaning of a preceding verb, just as in Exodus 21:8.

2. The verb בָּגַד is a technical term for breaking covenant. He has not broken covenant with her before selling her. But to sell her as a common slave, after marrying her, would be a breach of covenant.

6.5.3 The Third Obligation

The master is obligated to provide the girl with three things: food (specifically, meat), clothing, and עֲנֻתָּהּ. This last term appears only here in the Hebrew Bible. Following the Septuagint, most versions understand the term to refer to the woman's conjugal rights.

The traditional rendering has two weaknesses. First, it is usually justified by deriving the word from עָנָה "to afflict, humble," a decidedly negative word that sometimes refers to rape. The text obviously seeks the woman's interests, and it seems inconsistent with these to require the master to "afflict" her sexually. One might derive the term from עוֹן "to dwell," but this root does not have the same sexual overtones in Hebrew that "live with" does in English. Second, there is no parallel elsewhere in the Old Testament, or indeed in ancient Near Eastern literature, to suggest that a woman has a "right" to sexual attention from her husband. Citations of 1 Cor. 7:3 are quite beside the point, since the cultural context is entirely different, and nothing in 1 Cor. 7 would suggest that Paul has Exod. 21:10 in mind.

My interpretation follows Paul 1969, who shows that many ancient Near Eastern law codes identify three things that must be provided for a dependent person (such as a slave, a deserted wife, a dependent sister, or a dependent parent): food, clothing, and oil. These three things were viewed as the necessities of ancient life, and had to be provided for a person who was otherwise

without support. Exod. 21:10 describes the same social context as these parallels (maintenance of a dependent person), two of the three items are the same, the third item in Exodus is otherwise unknown in the Old Testament, and there is no other parallel available to explain the Exodus triplet. The conclusion seems unavoidable that Moses is reflecting a contemporary notion of the basic requirements of life, and that sexual attention is not one of them.

6.6 The Translation of Deut. 21:10-14

English translations begin the apodosis of the first conditional at 21:12, with the effect, "If you see a beautiful captive, then you shall bring her into your house." This analysis recommends the practice of taking captives as concubines.

The Hebrew text contains no indication of a break at the start of verse 12. The suffix conjugation verbs with *waw* consecutive that begin in 21:10 continue through וּבִכְתָּהּ in 21:13. Only with the disjunctive clause ... וְאַחֵר כֵּן in 21:13 do we come upon the command itself. All that goes before simply indicates the normal circumstances of war and the expected behavior of a female captive. The law does not recommend that warriors take their captives as concubines, but demands that if the captor decides on such a course of action, he must wait for the woman's mourning to run a reasonable course before taking her.

The law is not one of the standard Hebrew conditional forms. It is misleading to render it with a standard English conditional such as "if ... then" or "when ...then." Hebrew can use its common conditional particle כִּי without a formal apodosis, but English does not enjoy the same freedom with "when" or "if." Using English "when" for the introductory כִּי makes it impossible to avoid an earlier apodosis. So I have rendered the *waw* consecutive chain as a hypothetical situation, "It may happen that." Even so, it becomes monotonous in English, so I break the sentence when the subject shifts from the captor to the captive. The important point to keep in mind is that there is no command before verse 14.

6.7 Concubines in the Old Testament

The laws about servants and captives who are concubines to their masters envision a relation that less binding than full marriage. Though there is no unambiguous Hebrew word for "wife," there is one for "concubine," פְּלִגְשָׁה, suggesting that this relation is distinctive in the social fabric of the time. This note seeks to enhance our understanding of the custom in order to give further perspective to the two laws concerning it that we have studied.

Table 4 lists the relations identified in the Bible as concubinage. For each instance, we give

- a central reference for the relation;
- whether the passage is in a genealogical context or not;
- who the man and the woman are;
- the period in Israel's history (Patriarchal, Conquest, Judges, Monarchy, Captivity) in which the relation existed;
- other texts that refer to the same relation.

Table 4: Instances of Concubinage in the Bible (in chronological order)

Reference	Gen'l	Man	Woman	Period	Other Refs.
Gen. 22:24	x	Nahor	Reumah	Patriarch	
Gen.25:6	x	Abraham	Hagar?	Patriarch	
1 Chr. 1:32	x	Abraham	Keturah	Patriarch	
Gen. 35:22		Jacob	Bilhah	Patriarch	
1 Chr. 7:14	x	Manasseh	?	Patriarch	
Gen. 36:12	x	Elipaz	Timnah	Patriarch	
1 Chr. 2:46	x	Caleb	Ephah	Conquest	
1 Chr. 2:48	x	Caleb	Maacah	Conquest	
Jud. 8:31		Gideon	?	Judges	
Jud. 19,20		Levite	?	Judges	
2 Sam. 3:7		Saul	Rizpah	Monarchy	2 Sam.21:11
2 Sam. 5:13	x	David	many	Monarchy	2 Sam. 15:16; 16:21f; 19:6; 20:3; 1 Chr. 3:9
Song 6:8,9		Solomon	many	Monarchy	1 Kings 11:3
2 Chr. 11:21		Rehoboam	many	Monarchy	
Est. 2:14		Xerxes	many	Captivity	

Based on the instances of concubinage in this table, we can answer some questions about the custom.

- How is it **distributed**, both in Israel's history and in the different parts of the Old Testament?
- What is its **legal** status in the Old Testament?
- How does it **differ** from full marriage?
- What is the **relation** between concubinage and slavery?

6.7.1 Distribution of the Custom

The table shows that the custom of concubinage appears in almost every period of Israel's history. It is not mentioned before the flood. It also does not appear by name during the Egyptian bondage or the exodus or (among Israelites) after the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, probably because a concubine is a kind of slave and slave-owning is a luxury that the Israelites can ill afford in those periods when they are themselves slaves. The custom is well known among the patriarchs, and was active in the generations that lived during the conquest and the period of the judges.

The Law of Moses does not use the actual term "concubine." Perhaps the word, rare even in the patriarchal period, would be unfamiliar to the people after living without concubines or other slaves for four hundred years. Instead, the Law describes two common instances of the custom without using the term, anticipating that when Israel is once again a free people with property rights, they will resume the practice.

6.7.2 Is a Concubine a Wife?

In modern Western culture, a concubine is not a wife. She has no more of a legal relationship to her man than if she did not live with him (though a few recent "palimony" lawsuits suggest that this situation could change). By contrast, the culture of ancient Israel does recognize concubinage as a kind of marriage. We have already seen evidence of this identity in the use of

technical marriage vocabulary to describe the union of masters and slaves. The comparisons below give further evidence in cases where the word "concubine" appears explicitly.

Some women are described as wives in one passage and called concubines in another.

- In 1 Chron. 1:32, Keturah is called Abraham's concubine. Yet in Gen. 25:1 she seems very much Sarah's peer: "Abraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah."
- Bilhah is Jacob's concubine in Gen. 35:22. Yet we would never have suspected this from the story of their union in Gen. 30:4, where Rachel "gave him Bilhah her handmaid as wife." The expression is exactly the same as the one that describes full marriages in Gen. 41:45, where Pharaoh gives Asenath to Joseph; Josh. 15:17, where Caleb gives his daughter Achsah to Othniel; and 1 Sam. 18:27, where Saul gives his daughter Michal to David.

When the kings of Israel build their harems, wives and concubines are described in parallel terms: .

And David again took concubines and wives (2 Sam. 5:12).

And [Solomon] had women: 700 princesses, and 300 concubines. Now, his women turned away his heart (1 Kings 11:3).

For [Rehoboam] took 80 wives and 60 concubines (2 Chron. 11:21).

A concubine deprived of her husband is said to live in "widowhood" (2 Sam. 20:3).

Judges 19-20 offers an extensive picture of the relation of a man with his concubine. The man "takes" her as a wife (19:1), an action described with the same idiom as that used for the marriage of Abram to Sarah, or Nahor to Milcah (Gen. 11:29). He is "her man" (Jud. 19:3), the same position occupied by Abraham with relation to Sarah (Gen. 16:3). Her father is described as his "father in law" (Jud. 19:4,7,9), and he as the father's "son in law" (Jud. 19:5). If we were not told that the woman is his concubine, we would surely consider her his wife. Their partnership is no casual alliance of the moment, but a union recognized by the culture. When the people of Gibeah rape and murder the woman, the resulting social outrage is so great that it leads to civil war.

These similarities show that concubinage is a relation that the culture of the Old Testament recognizes. It is a kind of marriage. We know that a concubine is different from a full wife because Hebrew uses a special word to describe her.

6.7.3 How are Concubines Different from Wives?

We can see the difference between a concubine and other wives most clearly in the effect on the children, and in how the husband treats the concubine.

The children of the concubine often take second rank to the children of the full wife.

We have seen already that Keturah is Abraham's concubine. Careful study of Gen. 25:6 suggests that Hagar is another. The verse refers to Abraham's "concubines," so we know that there were at least two. Genesis records three women in Abraham's household: Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah. Keturah is one concubine. Sarah is certainly not a concubine, so unless the author has left some of Abraham's women unnamed, Hagar must be the missing second concubine.

Once we realize that Hagar is a concubine, we can clearly trace the effect of the custom on the children. Speaking of Hagar and her son Ishmael, Sarah tells Abraham,

"Drive out this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac" (Gen. 21:10).

Even after Sarah's death, Abraham complies with her request.

Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac. But to the sons of the concubines that Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away from Isaac his son while he was still living, eastward, to the east land (Gen. 25:5,6).

Abraham takes pains to secure the preeminence of Sarah's son as his full heir. He physically removes the other children from Isaac, to lessen the risk of later competition.

When the Chronicler enumerates the sons of David, he barely mentions those born of concubines:

All the sons of David, besides the sons of concubines, and Tamar their sister (1 Chron. 3:9).

In fact, as Table 4 shows, it is from genealogical passages that we learn who most of the concubines in the Bible are. Genealogies place more emphasis on the difference between wife and concubine than do other sorts of literature, because that difference affects the standing of the children.

Some families in the Bible do not discriminate against the children of concubines. Jacob has children not only by his wives Leah and Rachel, but also by his concubine Bilhah, and by Zilpah, who is probably also a concubine. The sons of the handmaidens are Gad, Asher, Dan, and Naphthali, and they become fathers of tribes in Israel, as well as Judah, Reuben, Benjamin, and the others. The father is at liberty to treat his children as he pleases, but the culture presumes that he will favor the children of full wives over those of concubines.

The concubine herself, as well as her children, is a second class citizen in her husband's home. In Gen. 21:10, Sarah has no qualms about asking Abraham to send Hagar away, and the Lord gives his permission for this separation. When David flees from Absalom, he leaves ten of his concubines to keep the house (2 Sam. 15:16), exposing them to the abuse of his angry son (2 Sam. 16:22). When he returns to Jerusalem, he virtually divorces them (2 Sam. 20:3) because Absalom has defiled them.

6.7.4 Servants and Concubinage

We have seen that concubines and wives are the same, but different. Both are recognized relations in the culture of the Old Testament, but they differ in the status of their children. Unless a father expressly intervenes, the children of legitimate wives take precedence over the children of concubines.

The reason for this distinction seems to lie in the lower social status of concubines. We do not know the class of every concubine named in the Old Testament, but in the cases where we do have evidence, they are slaves.

Hagar is one of Abraham's concubines. She is also a slave, the handmaid of Sarah (Gen. 16:1). It is because she is a slave that Sarah insists on her second class status (Gen. 21:10).

Bilhah, identified as Jacob's concubine in Gen. 35:22, is Rachel's handmaid (Gen. 30:1-8). The symmetry between Bilhah and Zilpah, the maid whom Leah gave to Jacob, suggests that Zilpah should also be considered as Jacob's concubine. Even after their marriage to Jacob, they are considered his handmaids (Gen. 32:22), so their elevation does not remove them from the status of slaves.

The ten concubines whom David leaves in Jerusalem when he flees Absalom are probably also servants. Their duty in David's absence is to "keep the house." They are domestics whom David has taken into his harem.

The overtones of slavery in concubinage are so strong that some authors (e.g., Neufeld 1944:121) suggest that the two Hebrew words for "handmaid," אַמָּה and שִׁפְחָה, share with פְּלִגְשָׁה the basic meaning of "concubine." This position is overstated. Both words for "handmaid" frequently refer to a woman's handmaid as well as a man's, and are often applied to women whom their masters do not take as concubines. It does reflect the strong impression throughout the Old Testament that concubinage and slavery are closely related institutions. A society that distinguishes slaves and free people would have a hard time giving a slave wife the same status as a free wife. At least some of the difference between a concubine and a full wife reflects the difference between slave and free.

CHAPTER 7 WHEN GOD PUT AWAY ISRAEL

We have learned that the marriage bond is forged by God, but divorce is a man-made institution. Though Israel's law recognizes that divorce occurs, it never sanctions it. So we are startled when some of the Old Testament prophets describe God as putting away his spiritual wife, the nation Israel. In this chapter

- we study the **prophetic picture** of Israel as God's wife.
- Then we examine the references to the separation of God and his people, tracing three common themes through **Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah**.
- Finally we examine more closely the **rationale** behind the description of God putting away his spiritual wife.

7.1 God's Marriage to his People

In both Testaments, the Bible frequently uses marriage to picture the relationship between God and his people. In fact, Eph. 5:30-32 suggests that God designed marriage in the form he did specifically so that it could help us better understand and appreciate our relationship with him.

Marriage is a good picture of God's relation to his people, in many different ways. In this section, we trace five aspects of this similarity:

1. the uniqueness of the partnership,
2. its basis in covenant;
3. the fruitfulness that results from it,
4. the jealousy that arises when the covenant is betrayed,
5. and the need to judge an unfaithful partner.

7.1.1 A Unique Partnership

Israelite society is basically monogamous. Its ideal is one wife for each husband and one husband for each wife. In Eden, God makes one woman for one man. Genesis does record how some of the patriarchs have extra wives — and extra troubles to go with them. The tensions between Sarah and Hagar, or between Leah and Rachel, are an implicit warning against polygamy. Thus Paul can summarize the Old Testament teaching as monogamous. To those "who know the law" (Rom. 7:1), he writes,

The woman in wedlock is bound by law to her living husband. But if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law of the husband. So then, while her husband lives, she shall be called "adulteress" if she marries another man (Rom. 7:2-3).

Marriage is an appropriate picture of God's relationship with Israel because he as Israel's husband has no other nation as his wife, and she as his wife has no other god as her husband. He insists that she be his alone: "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Exod. 20:3). He, in turn, reserves his special favor for her:

You are a holy people to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you over all the peoples that are on the face of the earth to become a special people for himself (Deut. 7:6).

7.1.2 A Relationship by Covenant

When we considered the nature of marriage in Chapter 3, we learned that marriage is a covenant, a solemn promise between two parties.

God's relation to Israel is also defined by a covenant, the covenant he made with them at Mount Sinai after they left Egypt.

- When he meets with them in Exodus 19, he invites them to "obey my voice and keep my **covenant**" (Exod. 19:5).
- After giving them the ten commandments in Exod. 20:1-17, he summons Moses up into the mount for more detailed instruction. This instruction, contained in Exodus 21-23, is later called "the book of the **covenant**" (Exod. 24:7).
- After reading this book to the people and obtaining their consent, Moses sprinkles them with the blood of oxen and says, "Behold, the blood of the **covenant** that the Lord has made with you concerning all these words" (Exod. 24:8).

Marriage is a fitting image of God's relation with Israel because both relationships have their basis in covenants.

7.1.3 A Fruitful Union

Children are at the center of the Bible's idea of marriage.

Behold, children are the Lord's bequest; The fruit of the womb is a reward (Ps. 127:3).

The patriarchs mourn when they are childless, and rejoice when the Lord brings fruit to their unions.

The Bible frequently refers to Israel as "God's children." Moses is to demand the release of Israel from Egypt with the words

Thus says the Lord: "Israel is my son, my firstborn. And I say to you, 'Let my son go, that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn'" (Exod. 4:22-23).

Later, Moses tells the Israelites, "You are sons for the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1). Once the metaphor presents God as the father of his people, it is natural to introduce the nation as the mother. As we will see, the prophets take this step, depicting the nation as God's wife, and the individual citizens as the children of this union.

Thus, both human marriage and God's marriage with his people produce offspring.

7.1.4 A Matter for Jealousy

God ordains that one man and one woman commit themselves to one another. When one spouse violates this trust, the other is right to feel jealous. The Bible never condemns this sense of zeal for one's own partner, but describes it as a natural emotion. It is depicted most clearly in Num. 5:11-31. There "a spirit of jealousy comes upon" a man "and he is jealous of his wife" (Num. 5:14). God does not dismiss his jealousy as a petty or childish whim, but provides a test to see whether or not his fears are justified.

Israel belongs to God, and is to worship no one else. She risks God's anger if she forsakes him. To emphasize this, he draws once again on the vocabulary of marriage, and describes himself as "jealous."

You shall not make for yourself any carved image, ... for I the Lord your God am a jealous God (Exod. 20:3-5).

You shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God (Exod. 34:14).

7.1.5 The Results of Faithlessness

With so many points of similarity between marriage and God's relation to Israel, it is natural that the Bible should depict God and Israel as husband and wife. We have already seen components of this metaphor--unique partnership, the covenant, fruitfulness, jealousy--in the earliest books of the Bible. The word-picture is so appropriate that when the prophets must describe the faithlessness of Israel in departing from the Lord, they naturally use marital imagery.

Israel has two ways to handle unfaithfulness in human marriage. God's way is to stone the guilty party. Society's way is divorce. Neither is entirely adequate to describe how God handles faithless Israel. He does not dismiss her to seek another wife, as do men who divorce their spouses. Nor does he destroy her, for forgiveness and restoration are central to the prophetic message.

In the last section of this chapter, we examine more closely the choices faced by the prophets and how they select among them. The picture they adopt, though with significant modifications, is that God puts the nation away. This putting away takes the form of physical exile. Like a husband putting his wife out of his house, the Lord thrusts out first the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C., then the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C., from the land of promise and into captivity.

At least three prophets draw attention to this detail of the Lord's marriage to Israel. Hosea describes the people of the Northern Kingdom as the children of that nation, and has them join the Lord in court against their adulterous mother, in warnings issued just before the Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C.

Bring charges against your mother, bring charges. For she is not my wife, and I am not her husband (Hos. 2:2).

Jeremiah also describes the spiritual adultery of the Northern Kingdom, during the period between the two captivities.

For all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery, I had sent her away and given her certificate of divorce to her (Jer. 3:8).

Isaiah speaks in similar terms to the people of the Southern Kingdom. Though he ministers before 722 B.C., he speaks from a future, prophetic vantage point, as though the Babylonian captivity of 586 B.C. has already taken place.

Thus says the Lord: "Where is the certificate of your mother's divorce, whom I have put away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? For your iniquities you have sold yourselves, and for your transgressions your mother has been put away" (Isa. 50:1).

We will study each of these passages in its context. As we compare them, we will find three features repeated in each one.

1. Israel has been guilty of **spiritual adultery** against God, her husband.
2. God **puts her away**, with varying degrees of formality.

3. Yet the **result** of this separation is not an end to the relation. God does not set Israel free from the marriage, but offers her a choice between punishment and restoration.

7.2 Hosea's Account

Hosea prophesies during the last years of the Northern Kingdom. The ten tribes have repeatedly turned away from the Lord. Hosea condemns their sin, reveals God's anger against it, and warns of coming punishment. His warnings are fulfilled in the Assyrian conquest of Samaria in 722 B.C.

Hosea develops God's putting away of Israel as a drama in four acts.

1. In Hosea 1:2-9, God commands Hosea to marry a woman who will be unfaithful to him.
2. Hosea's experience becomes an illustration of God's experience with Israel in Hos. 2:2-13. God takes his errant wife to court. The imagery is founded on Hosea's accusation of his wife, but in fact Hosea does not seem to have pressed formal charges, for his wife is not executed but left alive so that he can restore her later. Verse 13 shows that the real application of the passage is to Israel.
3. In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness, God promises in Hos. 2:14-23 to restore her.
4. Hosea, to complete the picture, takes back his faithless wife in Hosea 3. The Lord must explicitly instruct him to take this action, since it is contrary to the principle of the law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24.

The three points we are tracing (the putting away, Israel's spiritual adultery, and the hope of restoration) are emphasized in the second and third acts.

7.2.1 God Puts Away Israel

The first half of Hosea 2 depicts God's actions in putting away Israel. The scene opens in a courtroom.

Bring charges against your mother, bring charges (Hos. 2:2).

The verb "bring charges" is a legal verb describing a formal lawsuit. God is not merely talking about Israel's sin. He is taking her to court. Her sin is so flagrant that her children recognize it, and so heinous that they stand with him to accuse her.

The point of the lawsuit is given in the words,

*She is not my wife,
and I am not her husband (Hos. 2:2).*

These words are far more significant than their brevity might lead us to expect. They are a reversal of the traditional Jewish formula of marriage. From the Jewish settlement of Elephantine in Egypt of the fifth century B.C., scholars have recovered marriage contracts that suitors prepared in order to take wives. These contracts always include the words,

*She is my wife
and I am her husband.*

Hosea reverses these words in Hos. 2:2 to describe an "unmarriage," a putting away.

The formula in Hos. 2:2 by which the Lord puts Israel away recalls Hos. 1:9,

*You are not my people,
and I am not "I AM" to you.*

"I AM" is the name under which God led the Israelites out of Egypt (Exod. 3:14). As he prepares the people for their Exodus, he promises them,

*I will take you to me for a people,
and I will be to you for God (Exod. 6:7).*

This relationship of God and people lies at the heart of the covenant of Sinai. In effect, Hos. 1:9 repudiates that covenant.

Marriage is a picture of God's covenant with Israel. God revokes the covenant by contradicting one of its key formulas in Hos. 1:9. In the same way, Hos. 2:2 dissolves the marriage that depicts the covenant by contradicting the ancient formula of marriage.

7.2.2 Israel's Spiritual Adultery

As the trial proceeds, God makes very clear that his wife is the guilty party. She has left her husband for other men:

"She decked herself with her earrings and jewelry, and went after her lovers. But me she forgot," says the Lord (Hos. 2:13).

She has borne children to her lovers:

I will not have mercy on her children, for they are the children of harlotry (Hos. 2:4).

She is ignorant of the Lord's gifts to her, and instead attributes them to her lovers:

For she said, "I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink" (Hos. 2:5).

For she did not know that I gave her the grain, and the new wine, and the oil, and multiplied silver to her, and gold (Hos. 2:8).

She has stopped living as the Lord's wife, and we are not surprised that he insists,

She is not my wife,

and I am not her husband (Hos. 2:2).

7.2.3 Punishment or Restoration

We are witnessing a lawsuit between God and the nation Israel. Thus far, it looks just like any divorce. The husband accuses the wife of infidelity, and declares that they are no longer man and wife.

In modern divorces, the man and woman would now be free to go their own ways. Israel has no such freedom in Hosea 2. God still acts like her husband. He is still jealous, and presses charges against her for adultery. He still loves her and wants her for his wife.

Israel is not free, for God threatens her with judgment.

Let her put away her harlotries from her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts, lest I strip her naked and expose her, as in the day she was born, and make her like a wilderness, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst (Hos. 2:2,3).

Now I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one shall deliver her from my hand (Hos. 2:10).

I will visit upon her the days of the Baals, in which she burned incense to them (Hos. 2:13).

God also does not claim freedom to seek another wife. He still wants Israel.

Therefore, behold, I will hedge up your way with thorns, and wall her in, so that she cannot find her paths. She will chase her lovers, but not overtake them. She will seek them, but not find them. Then she will say, "I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better for me than now." (Hos. 2:6-7)

In the third act of Hosea's drama (Hos. 2:14-23), God promises to restore his bride to himself:

I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me with righteousness, and with justice, and with lovingkindness, and with mercy. I will betroth you to me with faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord (Hos. 2:19-20).

Hosea 3 then emphasizes this divine reunion in the prophet's life. Though the law requires an adulterous wife to be stoned, Hosea, after divine insistence, takes back his adulterous wife.

To secular readers both ancient and modern, God's separation from Israel in Hosea is very strange. Like many divorces, it results from the unfaithfulness of one party, and is a legal proceeding. Unlike secular divorces, it does not end the relationship of man and wife. Instead, it seeks restoration, and offers punishment by death as the only alternative.

Hosea's description of God putting away Israel is strange. But it is not alone. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah describe the break-up of God's marriage with his people. The details of the picture language differ among the three books. All three lead to the same unexpected outcome, that putting away does not end the relationship between man and wife.

7.3 Jeremiah's Account

Jeremiah begins his ministry to Judah, the Southern Kingdom, in 627 B.C., the thirteenth year of Josiah the king (Jer. 1:2). Almost a hundred years have passed since Sargon took Israel, the Northern Kingdom, captive to Assyria. A century earlier, the Southern Kingdom saw what happened to their northern relatives. But they refuse to mend their ways, and Jeremiah must announce to them that their own judgment is close at hand.

In Jeremiah 3, the prophet uses the metaphor of marital separation both to recall Israel's fate and to warn Judah of her own coming judgment.

7.3.1 Judah's Idolatry as Adultery

Throughout Jer. 2, the prophet illustrates the wickedness of Judah's idolatry with the metaphor of marital infidelity. Then, in Jer. 3:1, he explicitly introduces the divorce law of Deut. 24:1-4. Judah callously assumes that she can indulge her lusts as long as she pleases, and then return to the Lord when she finds it convenient. By a close paraphrase of God's divorce law, Jeremiah warns his hearers that they have no right to presume on God's grace in this way.

"They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again? Would not that land be greatly polluted?' In your case, you have played the harlot with many lovers, and would you now return to me?" says the Lord.

Jeremiah abstracts three points from Deuteronomy 24:

1. If a man divorces his wife,
2. and she lives with another man,
3. then her first husband may not take her back.

His warning grows out of the second and third of these points.

Judah's sin is worse than that of the woman in Deuteronomy 24. There, the woman's adultery was confined to a single man, and made respectable with the veneer of "marriage." Here, Judah takes many partners in open harlotry.

Where have you not been ravished? By the roads you have sat for them like an Arabian in the wilderness, and you have polluted the land with your harlotries and your wickedness. ... You have had a harlot's forehead. You refuse to be ashamed (Jer. 3:2-3).

The severity of her sin makes judgment all the more imminent, yet Judah refuses to grasp the enormity of her infidelity. She assumes that she can enjoy her sin and then come running back to the Lord at the last moment:

In the time of their trouble they will say [to the Lord], "Arise, and save us." But where are your gods, from you have made for yourself? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble (Jer 2:27,28).

Judah should know from the law of Deut. 24:1-4 that an adulterous wife has no claim on her husband's care and protection.

7.3.2 The Memory of Israel's Rejection

Jeremiah seeks to awaken Judah to her peril by reminding her of her sister's fate. Having introduced Judah's sin under the figure of adultery, he describes Israel's sin and rejection by the Lord in the same terms, using the same three points of the marital metaphor that we have traced in Hosea: infidelity, putting away, and restoration.

Jeremiah says explicitly that the Lord gave Israel a "certificate of divorce," recalling the detailed legal language of Hosea's account.

And I saw when, for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery, I had sent her away and given her certificate of divorce to her, yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also (Jer. 3:8).

The "adultery" mentioned in verse 8 is spiritual adultery, following after other gods in place of the Lord.

Have you seen what apostate Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot (Jer. 3:6).

The Canaanites build their pagan sanctuaries in groves of trees on the tops of hills. Israel commits adultery against the Lord by participating in this worship.

Backsliding Israel committed adultery ... Through her casual harlotry, she polluted the land and committed adultery with the stones and the trees (Jer. 3:8-9).

"The stones and the trees" here are the idols whom she has taken as gods instead of the Lord.

Surely, as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with me, oh house of Israel (Jer. 3:20).

The verb translated "treacherously depart" and "deal treacherously" refers to the violation of the marriage covenant. By her adultery, Israel has broken that sacred promise.

God puts Israel away for her adultery against him. As in Hosea, the separation does not break the relationship between the parties. Israel is not free from God's wrath, if she refuses to repent. He, in turn, desires no other wife, but invites her to return.

"Return, apostate Israel," says the Lord, "and I will not cause my anger to fall on you. For I am merciful," says the Lord. "I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, and have scattered your ways to strangers under every green tree, and you have not obeyed my voice," says the Lord. "Return, backsliding children," says the Lord, "for I have married you" (Jer. 3:12-14).

God does not say, "I will marry you," but, "I have married you." He has put Israel away, yet the original marriage is still in effect. God's putting away of Israel has many effects. It expresses God's displeasure over of Israel's adultery, and it exposes her to his wrath. One effect it does **not** have is the one secular thought most often associates with divorce. It does not dissolve the marriage between them.

It is worth noting how the quotation of the divorce law in Jer. 3:1 highlights God's grace toward his people. According to the law, the unfaithful wife cannot return to the first husband, and God rebukes Judah for assuming that she can casually slide back and forth from one partner to the other. Her sin merits judgment, as Jeremiah warns over and over. Yet the Lord, unlike a human husband, can overrule the restriction of Deut. 24:4. He invited Israel to return (Jer. 3:12), and he urges Judah to turn again to him, not superficially, but with all her heart (Jer. 4:4,14).

7.4 Isaiah's Account

Isaiah is a contemporary of Hosea. They both preach "in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah" (Hos. 1:1; Isa. 1:1). Hosea speaks mostly to the Northern Kingdom and warns of the Assyrian captivity. Isaiah also talks about the Assyrian captivity, but his main message is to the Southern Kingdom, Judah (Isa. 1:1). The first 39 chapters of his prophecies warn Judah of the coming Babylonian captivity, which began around 600 B.C. Chapters 40 through 66 take as their perspective a time after that captivity, and look forward to God's restoration of the nation.

Thus Isaiah, who lives before Jeremiah, depicts the fulfillment of the events of which Jeremiah warns. Judah does not learn from Israel's separation, but persists in her adultery, and Isaiah reports that the Lord does indeed put her away for her sin. Because he is describing the captivity as past (rather than future, as Hosea did for Israel), he emphasizes the coming restoration.

Isaiah does not package his picture of Judah's separation from God as neatly as Hosea does Israel's, but spreads it through five chapters of the restoration prophecies, Isaiah 50 through 54.

The three key images of spiritual adultery, putting away, and restoration mingle with pictures of the Exodus and promises of the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord, in a kaleidoscope of hope and promise.

7.4.1 The Separation and Judah's Guilt

The separation is recorded in Isa. 50:1.

Thus says the Lord: "Where is the certificate of your mother's divorce, whom I have put away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you have sold yourselves, and for your transgressions your mother has been put away."

Hosea says that God puts the nation away, and shows her as the guilty party. Isaiah emphasizes that the wife takes the initiative to leave. God never gives Judah the legal certificate described in Deuteronomy 24. Her estrangement is not quite as formal as that of the Northern Kingdom, which was founded on deviation from the true faith. Still, the end of the verse does state that she "has been put away."

Isaiah uses two different pictures to show that the fault is Judah's alone. God did not sell her as a slave; she sold herself. God did not write her a certificate of divorce; she herself transgressed against him. This verse does not detail the sin as spiritual adultery, but accusations of idolatry are prominent throughout the rest of the book, and this offense is certainly included in the "iniquities" and "transgressions" mentioned in Isa. 50:1.

7.4.2 The Result of the Separation

Judah's separation from the Lord does not end their relation. Instead, it opens the floodgates of God's wrath against her. In Isa. 51:17-20, the prophet looks back at the punishment God brought on her for her sin.

Awake, awake! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury. You have drunk, you have drained, the dregs of the cup of trembling (Isa. 51:17).

She cannot turn for help to her husband, for she has left him. Perhaps the children of that marriage will aid her. But no,

there is no one to guide her among all the sons she has brought forth, nor is there any who takes her by the hand among all the sons she has brought up. These two things have come to you; who will be sorry for you? the desolation, and the destruction, and the famine, and the sword--by whom will I comfort you? (Isa. 51:18-19)

Her children cannot save her, for they are children of adultery, and the Lord is angry with them as much as with their mother.

Your sons have fainted, they lie at the head of all the streets, like an antelope in a net--they who are full of the fury of the Lord, the rebuke of your God (Isa. 51:20).

Yet anger is not God's only response to Judah's departure. Immediately after this record of punishment, God promises restoration:

See, I have taken out of your hand the cup of trembling, the dregs of the cup of my fury. You shall no longer drink it any more (Isa. 51:22).

In Isaiah 54, the prophet returns to the picture of marriage to portray this restoration.

Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed; nor be disgraced, for you will not be put to shame. For you will forget the shame of your youth, and will not remember the reproach of your widowhood any more.

"The shame of" Judah's "youth" is her unfaithfulness to the Lord as his wife. "The reproach of your widowhood" is the stigma she bears after she has left him. God will remove the reproach of widowhood by taking her again as his wife. Then she will be faithful to him, and no longer endure the shame of her youth.

For your maker is your husband. The Lord of Hosts is his name. And your redeemer is the holy one of Israel. He is called the God of the whole earth (Isa. 54:5).

In spite of the putting away, God is still her husband and her redeemer. They have been estranged, but the separation never altered their fundamental relationship as man and wife. The paradox between "I have put [you] away" (Isa. 50:1) and "your maker is your husband" (Isa. 54:5) is the same as that in Jeremiah between "I put her away" (3:8) and "I have married you" (3:14). In both cases, divorce serves to express the Lord's wrath, but does not alter the fundamental relation between man and wife.

"For the Lord has called you like a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, like a youthful wife, when she is be refused," says your God (Isa. 54:6).

God did refuse her for her sin, and she has come to mourn the separation she craved. Now he restores her to himself.

"For a short moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you. With a gush of wrath I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have mercy on you," says the Lord, your Redeemer (Isa. 54:7-8).

What about those children to whom she turned for help, those children who, like her, felt the blast of God's wrath? Now she will bear the Lord's own offspring, whom he will instruct to follow him.

All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children (Isa. 54:13).

For Isaiah, as for Hosea and Jeremiah, God puts away his people because they are unfaithful. Like Hosea and Jeremiah, and unlike modern thought, Isaiah shows that this separation does not free God and his people from one another. Judah is not free to pursue her idols, but is punished for her adultery. God does not take another wife, but patiently plans the restoration of his true love.

7.5 Explaining the Metaphor of Putting Away

After having considered the prophetic texts, we can summarize the contrasts between human divorce and the separation of God and Israel. To understand this metaphor, we need to review the message that the prophets have to convey and the options open to them within the broader picture of marriage. Then we can understand why the prophets say that God puts Israel away, and why they alter the details of this separation from those of common divorce.

7.5.1 A Strange Kind of Separation

Israel's law does not sanction divorce. The common culture, though, does practice divorce, and understands it very much as people do today. Then and now, people think that a divorce ends a marriage, so that the partners have no obligation to one another and are free to remarry.

God's separation from Israel is different from this prevailing view. When God puts Israel away, the parties remain related to one another. Israel is not free to take another husband, and the Lord does not want to take another wife. Israel must still deal with the Lord. He will either forgive her or punish her.

Here is a dilemma. The prophets describe God as the husband of Israel. Marriage is an appropriate metaphor for them to use. Yet when God puts Israel away, he does it in a way very different from the divorces that people know in daily life. To understand this altered image, we need to examine the ideas that the prophets are trying to convey.

7.5.2 The Prophetic Message

God has designed marriage so that the prophets can depict God and his people as man and wife. Part of the story that the prophets must tell is that Israel has violated her side of the covenant, and God will deal with her. How do they express this concept within the framework of marriage?

The law of fornication and adultery in Deuteronomy 22 gives one set of images that they can use. Moses commands that faithless wives be stoned. The prophets can simply say that the nation is a faithless wife, and God will destroy her for her sin. But they cannot preach only judgment, for God has given them a message of forgiveness and restoration as well.

The prophets have another set of images with which they can tell the story of a faithless wife. Their society recognizes divorce as a way for a man to be rid of such a woman.

There is need for caution here. The Law nowhere sanctions divorce. It warns repeatedly against adultery and harlotry, and divorce is a legal trick that people use to justify these sins. The prophets know that God unites man and wife in a way that no human institution can sever. When a couple divorces and the partners marry other people, they commit adultery. The prophets dare not portray God as doing something sinful.

At the same time, the law nowhere condemns divorce itself. It is remarriage that is adultery. It will be two hundred years before God reveals through Malachi that he "hates divorce" (Mal. 2:16), and even there the context shows that the problem is "dealing treacherously," breaking the marriage covenant by adultery. A husband does not sin by repudiating a wife who has already broken that covenant. Indeed, the law commands the wronged husband to repudiate her, and to "put the evil away from among" the nation by stoning her. Stoning, however, does not convey the prophets' message.

7.5.3 The Prophetic Image

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the prophets depict God as putting Israel away, while taking two precautions to avoid misunderstanding.

First, to protect God's reputation, they make it clear that Israel has already broken the marriage covenant by her adultery. (They need to make that point anyway, for in reality Israel has broken the covenant God made with her at Mount Sinai.)

Second, they do not want people to say that they are "following God's example" by divorcing faithless wives. The people should follow the law and stone them. So the prophets make it clear that God's separation frees neither God nor his people to seek other partners. They are still bound to each other, and if Israel does not repent, her destiny will be the same as though she had been stoned. In God's sovereign mercy, she will repent, and he will restore her to himself.

This picture is exactly the one we have seen in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. The metaphor of God's separation lets them show God's wrath against Israel's spiritual adultery. It is the first stage in a sequence of actions that leads naturally to destruction, illustrated by the stoning of the adulteress. Unlike stoning, it leaves the way open for repentance and restoration. Because the Law does not forbid divorce explicitly, the prophets can use it, with certain qualifications, to describe God. But the way Israel and other people commonly practice divorce, as a means of dissolving marriage, is against the Law. The prophets do not want to give tacit approval to this practice. So they sensitively describe God's action to show that it does not end God's marriage with Israel, but places it in an unstable condition where Israel must choose between forgiveness and judgment.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What similarities suggest describing God's relation with Israel as a marriage?
2. What prophets specifically extend this metaphor to speak of God putting away Israel?
3. What three features do all of these descriptions share?
4. How is God's separation from the Northern Kingdom different from his separation from the Southern Kingdom?
5. What is unusual about God's separation from his people, compared with human divorce?
6. Why do the prophets describe such an unusual form of marital separation, rather than using stoning or normal divorce to picture God's rejection of Israel?

CHAPTER 8 EZRA'S DIVORCE COURT

The Bible uniformly disapproves of divorce. So we are surprised to find in chapters 9 and 10 of Ezra a spiritual leader apparently urging his men to reject their women. In this chapter,

- we study the historical **setting** of Ezra's action
- and learn **why** it is right for him to do it.
- Then we compare his actions with **New Testament** instructions for similar situations,
- and explain the **differences** between the two cases.

8.1 The Historical Setting

Ezra is a Bible teacher who lives in Jerusalem beginning about 458 B.C. To understand his society, we need to look back more than a century before his time, to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian captivity, and the Jewish restoration.

8.1.1 The Fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar

Few days are as black in the memory of Israel as the ninth day of the month Ab, 586 B.C., when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroys the temple in Jerusalem.

Solomon labors for seven years to raise this monument to the God of Israel. Then the people gather there three times a year, at the great pilgrimage feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Israelites offer sacrifices in it to give thanks to God and ask his forgiveness for sin. The priests serve there for two week shifts, and then return to their villages to instruct the people in the law of God. The temple is the center of Israel's life and culture.

Then, suddenly, it is gone. The elegant cedar paneling burns to ashes. Pagan hands tear away the ornaments of gold and silver, as booty for foreign gods. The great hewn stones crash into the courtyards. And those who would rather stand and mourn, march in chains to a land hundreds of miles and weeks of travel away.

Yet not all is good that perishes under Nebuchadnezzar's torch. For years, the temple preserved the form of the Israelite faith, while the content of that faith decayed and rotted. The kings of Judah turned away from the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and worshipped other gods, the gods of the pagan nations around them. They brought this worship even into the courts of the temple, erecting altars to false deities in the sanctuary of the Lord. Ironically, the problem was as old as the temple itself. Solomon, who built the temple, also built sanctuaries for false gods, so that his pagan wives could worship their deities in Jerusalem (I Kings 11). What happens to the temple under Nebuchadnezzar already happened, years before, to the faith it was meant to enshrine. The Hebrew Prophets teach that the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity are God's chastisement on his wayward children.

8.1.2 The Jewish Restoration

The disaster of 586 B.C. is a severe chastisement. Yet God uses it, like all chastisement, to help those who endure it.

Seventy years after the burning of the temple, Babylon itself falls to the Persian conqueror Cyrus, as the Hebrew Prophets said it would. Cyrus, again fulfilling the Prophets, permits the Jews to return home and restore their traditional sanctuary.

The refugees are zealous for pure worship. Sobered with the memory of God's recent judgment, they carefully offer their sacrifices "as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God, ... as the duty of every day required" (Ezra 3:2,4). The priests conduct their work "after the ordinance of David king of Israel" (Ezra 3:10).

These refugees arrive in three waves. The first group comes under the leadership of Zerubbabel, who is the governor of Judah in the Persian bureaucracy (Haggai 1:1; 2:2,21). Eighty years later a smaller group of Jews returns with Ezra. After thirteen more years, another band comes back with Nehemiah, who like Zerubbabel is a Persian official of Jewish descent. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah are administrators. They supervise the tasks of rebuilding first the temple, then the city wall. Ezra is a priest, "a ready scribe in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6).

8.1.3 The Work of Ezra

Ezra returns to Jerusalem, as did the others, bearing gifts and business papers from the Persian ruler. His personal motive, though, is a pastoral one:

Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statute and ordinance (Ezra 7:10).

He has a mandate from King Artaxerxes to establish the Law of Moses as the civil law of Jerusalem. The king tells him to appoint magistrates who know Israel's Law (Ezra 7:25), and instructs him,

Whoever will not do the law of your God, ... let judgment be executed on him with all diligence (Ezra 7:26).

Ezra comes with civil authority to guide the people in obedience to God's law.

Shortly after Ezra arrives, a group of leaders comes to him for counsel. They report,

The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands. ... For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons, and the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of the lands. Indeed, the hand of the princes and the rulers has been chief in this trespass (Ezra 9:1-2).

Ezra is astonished to hear that this remnant, whose purpose is to avoid the sins of the past, has slipped so quickly into Solomon's original error of pagan spouses. He rips his garments and tears the hair from his beard and head to show his grief. Then he pours out his heart in a prayer of abject confession and penitence to God (Ezra 9).

Many of the sinners are jolted by Ezra's intercession. They gather about him and weep with him over their sin. Then one of their number suggests what they should do.

We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan women from the peoples of the land. Yet now Israel has hope concerning this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the women, and those who have been born to them, according to the counsel of the Lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the Law (Ezra 10:2,3).

Ezra agrees with the suggestion. The leaders summon the entire population, under severe threat:

Whoever would not come within three days, ... all his property would be confiscated, and he himself would be separated from the congregation (Ezra 10:8).

When the people assemble, there are too many mixed couples to handle them all on the spot. For the next three months Ezra and selected elders labor over the cases, dissolving the unions that threaten the vitality of the young commonwealth. The work is not easy or pleasant. Even people from the priestly families are involved. Some of the unions are of long standing, and many have children (Ezra 10:44). It is a social upheaval of major proportions, undertaken only because the people realize that the alternative is "the fierce wrath of our God" (Ezra 10:14).

8.2 Why does Ezra Urge Separation?

The actions of Ezra 10 pose a challenging puzzle. Ezra and his contemporaries want to follow the Law of Moses to the utmost detail. They are plainly the heroes of the scriptural record. Yet they are separating families, while the Law, the Prophets, the Gospels, and the Epistles decry divorce.

8.2.1 Ezra and Malachi

Some of God's laws change from time to time. The laws of marriage are comparatively stable. Moses, hundreds of years before Ezra, recognizes only death as ending a marriage. Centuries after Ezra, the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5 confirms this legislation. In Ezra's own generation, to Ezra's own society, the prophet Malachi makes one of the strongest statements against divorce in the entire Bible:

The Lord testified between you and your youth-wife, with whom you have dealt treacherously. Yet is she your companion, and your covenant-wife. ... Therefore take heed to your spirit, that none deal treacherously with his youth-wife. For the Lord, the God of Israel, says that he hates putting away. "For it covers one's garment with violence," says the Lord of hosts. Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you deal not treacherously (Malachi 2:14-16).

Malachi emphasizes that "the Lord ... hates divorce," while Ezra tells the same generation that they must put away their consorts. In spite of appearances, Ezra and Malachi do not disagree. By observing carefully how Ezra describes the unions, we will see that he distinguishes them from ordinary marriages, much as Moses distinguishes concubines. By recalling the legal status of mixed unions under the Law of Moses, we will learn the reason for this distinction.

8.2.2 How Ezra Describes the Unions

When we studied concubinage in Chapter 6 we learned that biblical society recognizes more than one kind of marriage, and God's Law imposes different standards on these different relationships. Concubinage, for instance, is less binding than full marriage, but more binding than a casual alliance. We recognized that concubinage was distinct from full marriage because it has a distinctive name. By studying examples of the custom, we concluded that it provided for wives of a specific social class.

Concubinage and full marriage may be compared along three dimensions. Linguistically, though some marriage idioms apply to both, there is a special term for a concubine. Socially, a concubine is her master's slave, while a full wife is not. Legally, the Law discourages divorce of a full wife, but permits divorce of a concubine.

The same three dimensions help us to understand the unions in Ezra 9 and 10. Legally, Ezra demands that these unions be ended, while concubinage may be ended and full marriage must not be ended. Socially, the unions in Ezra 9 and 10 are with free foreign women, not slaves or free Israelites. Linguistically, like concubinage, these unions are described with language that includes some marriage idioms but also has distinct features. The legal and social character of the cases with which Ezra deals are clear from our historical survey. Here, we discuss the linguistic distinctions in more detail.

Distinctive Language in Ezra 9-10.—The descriptions of the unions in Ezra 9 and 10 differ in subtle ways from the standard language for marriage that we studied in the notes to Chapter 3. The expressions that describe how the Israelites enter these unions are shorter than the standard expression and use different verbs, suggesting that the unions are not legitimate.

Ezra 9 and 10 describe the unions of Israelite men with pagan women with the phrase, "take a woman."

*They have **taken** some of their daughters for themselves and for their sons (9:2).*

*We have trespassed against our God, and have **taken** pagan women (10:2).*

*You have transgressed, and have **taken** pagan women (10:10).*

*...all those ...who have **taken** pagan women ... (10:14)*

*...all the men who had **taken** pagan women ... (10:17)*

*... there were found ... those who had **taken** pagan women ... (10:18)*

*All these had **taken** pagan women (10:44).*

The expression "He took a woman" can describe marriage in the Bible, as in Gen. 25:1 or Jer. 29:6. However, it can also describe a rape (Gen. 34:2), so it does not by itself imply that a union is legitimate. Biblical writers use more complicated expressions, such as "he took to him a woman" or "he took her and she was to him as a woman," to refer unambiguously to marriage. Furthermore the standard expression elsewhere always uses a certain verb "to take" that the expressions in Ezra 9 and 10 do not use. Ezra uses two words, both different from "took" in Gen. 24:67. The verbs used in Ezra 9 and 10 appear elsewhere in the Old Testament, and always describe substandard unions. Sometimes they are applied to polygamy. More often, as here, they refer to unions with pagans. Never do they describe a marriage such as that of Adam and Eve, or Abraham and Sarah, or Isaac and Rebekah. The verbs used in Ezra 9 and 10, as well as the form of the expression, imply that something is wrong with the union that they describe.

Standard Expressions in Ezra 9-10.—The short expression and the nonstandard verbs are linguistic clues that these unions differ from full marriages, just as the special word for a concubine alerts us to a distinct relationship with slaves. Yet these unions are more than casual alliances, as we learn from the length of time and the amount of effort needed to dissolve them in

an orderly fashion. Thus we are not surprised to see some standard marriage language used to describe them.

One of the longer expressions for entering a marriage occurs once in these chapters, in Ezra 9:2, when the leaders report to Ezra shortly after his arrival,

The people of Israel... have taken of [the pagans'] daughters for themselves, and for their sons.

The formula, "to take [a woman] for someone," is nowhere used of a rape or other casual union. It is the expression that Abraham uses to send his servant to find a wife for Isaac in Gen. 24:4, 7, 37, 38, 40. However, the verb in Ezra 9:2 is not the standard marriage verb, but one of the unfamiliar verbs used elsewhere in these chapters. The form of the statement suggests an official marriage, but the verb is different.

The most official marriage idiom that appears in these chapters is the expression "their wives" in Ezra 10:19, describing the foreign partners of some of the priests. Like the form of Ezra 9:2, this expression reflects the stability and informal social acceptance of the unions. As in the case of concubinage, the special expressions used to describe the unions alert us that they may be treated differently from full marriages.

8.2.3 Mixed Unions and the Law of Moses

Ezra 9 and 10 describe the union of an Israelite and a pagan with distinctive language because the Law of Moses forbids such unions. Ezra in his prayer of confession recalls the law given originally in Deut. 7:3.

We have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, "... Now therefore do not give your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons" (Ezra 9:10-12).

The Law of Moses is the cornerstone and constitution of the restoration. Mixed unions violate the constitution, so they are illegal. This particular law was ignored as the custom grew more popular. But these couples were never legally married. They never can be married, as long as one partner remains pagan. Ezra and his helpers are not advocating divorce. They are annulling unions that cannot enjoy the civil endorsement required for a full marriage.

8.2.4 Ezra and Malachi Again

Our attention was drawn to Ezra's actions by their contrast with Malachi's strong teaching against divorce. The two teachers do not contradict one another. Ezra does not command the people to divorce and thus betray "your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14), but to forsake partnerships that violate the civil law. Malachi feels as strongly about pagan unions as Ezra does. Just before denouncing the divorce of a truly married couple, he cries out,

Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the holiness of the Lord, ... and has married the daughter of a strange god (Mal. 2:11).

8.3 Mixed Marriages in the New Testament

Ezra separates Jews from their pagan partners. Today, believers married to unbelievers are in a similar situation. Should church leaders urge members of their flocks to leave unbelieving spouses?

Like Ezra, the New Testament disapproves of mixed unions. Unlike Ezra, it tells believers with unbelieving partners to stay with them, rather than to leave.

8.3.1 Mixed Unions are Wrong

The New Testament gives strong warnings against any commitments to unbelievers, not just marriage. For example, Paul charges the Corinthians with being so friendly with unbelievers that they have no time for their brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul says that they unjustly reject him:

You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. Now ... you also be open (2 Cor. 6:12,13).

We may paraphrase this,

We have not shut you out, but you have shut us out of your affections. I beg you, make room for us.

Later he urges them,

Receive us. We have wronged no man. We have corrupted no man. We have defrauded no man. ... You are in our hearts, to die and live with you (2 Cor. 7:2-3).

He must plead for their affection because they have been seduced by ungodly influences. Between these two requests for their affection, Paul instructs them,

Do not become unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what fellowship do righteousness and lawlessness have? And what communion does light have with darkness? And what concord does Christ have with Belial? Or what part does a believer have with an unbeliever? And what agreement does the temple of God have with idols? For you are the temple of the living God: as God has said, "I will dwell in them, and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Wherefore, "Come out from among them, and be separate," says the Lord, "and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you and you shall be my sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Believers must "come out from" ungodly alliances, if they wish to be God's "sons and daughters." No Christian who understands this principle can contemplate the intimacy of married life with an unbeliever.

8.3.2 Mixed Unions Should Not Be Dissolved

The New Testament condemns mixed marriages. Yet it describes no episode parallel to that of Ezra. There were many mixed marriages in the early churches, resulting when one spouse received Christ and the other did not. The New Testament writers never tell the believing spouse to leave the unbeliever. In fact Paul tells the Corinthians to remain in such unions.

If any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she is pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And as for the woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he is pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him (1 Cor. 7:12-13).

These are the same Christians whom he later exhorts not to be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers." The relation is undesirable, but he does not command them to end it, as Ezra did. Though the New Testament forbids close alliances with unbelievers, it explicitly says that believers who are married to unbelievers should remain in those unions.

The instruction not to dissolve mixed marriages is no excuse for a believer to marry an unbeliever. We have already seen that a believer who marries an unbeliever sins against the Lord, and can expect divine chastisement for such disobedience. Paul's instructions are intended for people who become Christians after marriage, and whose spouses do not follow them in faith. They do not justify entering a union that is mixed from its beginning.

8.4 Why do Ezra and the New Testament Differ?

In Chapter 3, we saw that a valid marriage requires physical union, the promise of mutual commitment of the partners, and conformity to the civil law in effect when the marriage takes place. The third element, conformity to civil law, distinguishes the situation in Ezra 9-10 from parallels in the New Testament and in modern society.

The civil authority in Jerusalem during the restoration period is that of Persia, delegated through the governor of Judea. That governor is a Jew, and rules the community according to the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses is thus a civil constitution, as well as a divine revelation. It forbids the marriage of believer with unbeliever. In that context, a mixed union can never be a valid marriage. It may embody physical union and deep mutual commitment, but it cannot satisfy the requirements of civil law. Because the unions can never be normalized, they must be dissolved.

In first-century Corinth and in modern western society, the civil authority does not follow biblical principles. The spiritual state of the partners in a marriage means a great deal to the church and synagogue, but is irrelevant to the civil definition of marriage in ancient Greece or the modern United States. A mixed union is illegal in Jerusalem under Ezra, but acceptable to the civil authorities in Corinth in A.D. 60 or in New York in A.D. 1987. Spiritual problems will result from such a union, and with these spiritual problems the church must deal. But the marriage is legally in order, and to dissolve it is divorce.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why does God send the children of Israel into captivity in Babylon?
2. What is the constitution of the Jewish commonwealth after the Babylonian captivity?
3. What is the status of mixed unions under that body of law?
4. What evidence is there in Ezra that mixed unions are considered irregular?
5. Do Ezra's actions support divorce? Why or why not?
6. Does the New Testament approve of mixed marriages?
7. Compare and contrast the handling of mixed unions under Ezra and in the New Testament.

8. Should a believer today seek to dissolve a mixed marriage? Why or why not?

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CHAPTER 9 DIVORCE IN OUR LORD'S SERMON ON THE MOUNT

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus raises several practical questions about godly living. One of these is the matter of divorce (Matt. 5:32).

Whoever dismisses his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery.

These verses are puzzling, because the clause about fornication applies only to the divorced wife and not to her second husband. If her divorce results from fornication, she appears to be protected from committing adultery, but her future spouse is not! Scholars have wrestled with these verses for centuries, and the notes to this chapter summarize some of their approaches. This chapter presents a new solution.

- We begin by stating the puzzle in more detail.
- By comparing the divorce verses with their context, we see that the Lord is addressing an error in the Pharisees' teaching about divorce and remarriage.
- Then we show how the puzzle arises from a play on words that the Lord uses in correcting their error.

9.1 The Puzzle of Matt. 5:32

The puzzle of Matthew 5:32 centers about the clause that reads, "except for the cause of fornication." If this clause were not here, the verse would read,

Whoever dismisses his wife causes her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery.

This teaching would agree with the Lord's statements in Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18, as well as with the general trend that we have traced through the Old Testament. God institutes marriage, and man cannot undo God's marriage bond. "If one should marry her who has been dismissed," he takes a woman who still belongs to someone else and thus "commits adultery." Furthermore, the Jewish culture of the first century A.D. offers almost no way for a divorced woman to earn a living. "Whoever divorces his wife" puts her in a position in which she must marry someone else, and thus "causes her to commit adultery."

The fornication clause complicates things. "Whoever dismisses his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery." This suggests that whoever dismisses his wife **for the cause of** fornication will **not** cause her to commit adultery. Why not? Has fornication somehow dissolved the marriage bond, so that she may remarry without being guilty of adultery?

The Lord's second statement leads us to doubt that fornication dissolves marriage. "Whoever marries her who has been dismissed commits adultery." The Lord makes no exception to this statement, not even for fornication. The man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery, whether or not she was divorced because of fornication. Even if fornication somehow frees her to marry a second husband, it does not free the second husband to marry her.

Table 5: The Contrasts of Matthew 5

Murder	<i>(5:21) You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment."</i>	<i>(5:22-26) But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. ...</i>
Adultery	<i>(5:27) You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not commit adultery."</i>	<i>(5:28-30) But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ...</i>
Divorce	<i>(5:31) Furthermore it has been said, "Whoever dismisses his wife, let him give her a divorce."</i>	<i>(5:32) But I say to you that whoever dismisses his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery.</i>
Oaths	<i>(5:33) Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord."</i>	<i>(5:34-37) But I say to you not to swear at all, ...</i>
Revenge	<i>(5:38) You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."</i>	<i>(5:39-42) But I say to you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. ...</i>
Love	<i>(5:43) You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."</i>	<i>(5:44-48) But I say to you, "Love your enemies, ..."</i>

The real puzzle about the fornication clause is that it does not apply equally to the woman and her second husband. It prevents her from committing adultery, but offers him no such protection. Why is fornication so unbalanced in its effects on the woman and her future suitors?

To solve this puzzle, we must consider the context in which the Lord presents it. He is disputing the teaching of the Pharisees on the subject of divorce, and he uses a play on words to emphasize an underlying inconsistency in their thought.

9.2 The Lord is Correcting an Error

The Lord presents the matter of divorce in Matthew 5 as one of a series of six contrasting pairs of statements. Each pair presents an earlier, erroneous teaching, and gives the Lord's correction of it. People sometimes suggest that the errors are outdated Old Testament teachings that the Lord is replacing with new instruction. By surveying all six pairs and considering the introduction to the section, we can see that it is Jewish tradition, not the Old Testament, that is in error.

9.2.1 Matthew 5 Offers Six Contrasts.

In Table 5, the center column presents the earlier error, and the right-hand column offers the Lord's correction. We want to identify the source of the center elements in these pairs.

9.2.2 The Source is Not the Old Testament.

Each contrasting pair begins with a statement like "You have heard." Some of these statements include quotations from the Old Testament. At first glance, we might think that they summarize the Old Testament Law, and that the Lord's comments in "I say to you" make that Law obsolete. The Lord is not overruling the Old Testament, though, as we can see in three ways: by

comparing the "You have heard" sentences with the Old Testament, by reading the Lord's introduction to this section in Matthew 5:17-20, and by noting how he introduces each saying.

In several cases, the "You have heard" sentences actually deviate from the Old Testament. For instance, Matthew 5:43 records the ancient teaching as "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Only the first clause, "You shall love your neighbor," comes from the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18). The second clause, "You shall hate your enemy," does not. The verse we are considering, Matt. 5:31, is another example of this deviation. Deuteronomy 24 does discuss the "certificate of divorce," but as we saw in Chapter 5 it does not sanction divorce, as does the statement here.

The introduction to the six contrasts, Matt. 5:17-20, shows even more clearly that the "You have heard" sentences are not summaries of the Old Testament Law.

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the Law until all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore repeals one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

In these verses, the Lord condemns anyone who would repeal any Old Testament command. Certainly he will not turn around and immediately render six of them obsolete! Since the Lord identifies the "you have heard" sections as erroneous, he must not mean them as summaries of the Old Testament.

A third confirmation that these verses are not meant as citations from the Old Testament lies in how they are introduced: "You have heard that it was said." Our Lord frequently cites the Old Testament (for example, to Satan in his temptation in the wilderness, in Matt. 4:4, 6, 7), and nowhere else does he ever introduce an Old Testament quotation by "it was said." The term he uses to indicate an Old Testament citation is "it is written."

9.2.3 The Source is First Century Jewish Teaching.

We can infer the source of the "you have heard" sections from the last verse of the Lord's introductory words, Matt. 5:20.

For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.

He tells his hearers that "the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" is inadequate, and then sets forth six examples of inadequate teaching.

The "You have heard" sections are specimens of "the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees." These religious leaders include the Old Testament in their teaching, so we hear echoes of the Old Testament in the Lord's summaries of their teaching. Because their teaching often deviates from the intent of the Scriptures, the "You have heard" sections often alter or add to the words of the Old Testament. In particular, the Pharisees believe that Deuteronomy 24 authorizes divorce, and Matt. 5:31 summarizes their teaching, not the Law of Moses.

The contrast we noted in the last section between “it is said” in Matt. 5 and “it is written” elsewhere in the gospels reflects the longstanding distinction in Pharisaic Judaism between the oral law and the written law. This tradition teaches that alongside the written law, God gave Moses an oral law that was not written down, but passed down from one generation to the next. The use of the phrase “it was said” rather than “it is written” in Matt. 5 refers to this oral tradition. In three of the citations, this instruction is said to have been given “to those of old” (5:21, 27, 33)¹, an allusion to the delivery of the tradition to the ancients, who then passed it own down to the scribes and Pharisees of the Lord’s day. By the first century, the oral tradition has come to dominate the the written text. Our Lord’s teaching calls the Jews back to the authority of what “is written” over what “is said.”

9.2.4 The Pharisees' Interpretation is Wrong.

When we studied Deuteronomy 24 in Chapter 5, we compared two interpretations, the "three law interpretation" and the "one law interpretation." According to the three law interpretation, the passage authorizes divorce. According to the one law interpretation, it does not authorize divorce, but controls restoration if someone divorces and remarries. We gathered evidence to show that the one law interpretation is preferable, and that the passage does not teach divine recognition of divorce.

The Pharisaic rule that the Lord is discussing is based on the faulty three law interpretation.

Whoever dismisses his wife, let him give her a divorce (Matt. 5:31).

The Lord's response to their position rejects the three law interpretation outright.

9.3 The Lord Answers with a Play on Words

The Pharisaic teaching cited in Matt. 5:31 is not only an erroneous interpretation of Deut. 24:1, but also a loose paraphrase rather than a quotation of that verse. The Lord plays on one detail of their paraphrase to highlight their underlying error.

9.3.1 The Citation is Loose.

The Pharisees' paraphrase of Deut. 24:1 deviates from the original in at least three ways.

1. Moses wrote of a "certificate of divorce," but they ignore the "certificate" and speak only of the "divorce."
2. Having dropped the "certificate," they do not speak of writing, as does Moses, but only of "giving a divorce."
3. Moses used a specific verb for "put away." The Pharisees use a different verb, "dismiss."

The third deviation is the least obvious to us, since most English versions translate both terms as "put away" or "divorce," but it is critical in understanding the Lord's response. He develops a word play with the Pharisees' term, a word play that would be impossible if they used Moses' word.

¹The dative is much more naturally understood to refer to the recipients of the speech than to the speakers, as the KJV takes it.

We must proceed with caution. We are studying a record written in Greek, of a sermon that may have been delivered in Aramaic, concerning a Hebrew law. How can we meaningfully say whether or not the vocabulary of Matthew 5 corresponds to the Old Testament vocabulary?

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic, not Greek, so strictly speaking no Old Testament word occurs in the New Testament. However, the Jews of the first century A.D. had Greek translations of the Hebrew Old Testament, just as we have English translations of the Hebrew and Greek Bible. The Greek versions of the Old Testament show us the commonly accepted Greek equivalents for the Hebrew words for divorce. Whether the Greek terms that we are considering originated with the Lord or with a later translator, our argument assumes that the widespread use of Greek translations of the Old Testament influenced the selection of those terms.

In Deut. 24:1-4, Moses uses three Hebrew phrases to describe the separation of man and wife. The English translations of these phrases are "certificate of divorce," "send her out" (elsewhere frequently translated "put her away"), and "she is departed." Whenever the Old Testament describes divorce, it always uses one or more of these expressions. Table 6 shows the English expressions, the Hebrew expressions, and the Greek terms used to translate them in the Greek Old Testament.

When the Pharisees tell a man to give his wife a "divorce," they use a word whose Greek equivalent is *αποστασιον*. (They themselves may have used either the Greek word or an Aramaic term of which this word is the translation.) From the table, we see that this is half of the Greek translation of the Hebrew expression "certificate of divorce." Even though the word is Greek rather than Hebrew, we can fairly say that it is an Old Testament word, since it corresponds to the Hebrew word through the Greek Old Testament.

When the Pharisees describe a man's "putting away" his wife, they do not use any of the words in the table above. Instead, they introduce a word whose Greek equivalent is *απολυω* "dismiss." This verb is a common word for "divorce" in Greek of the first century A.D., but it is never used in the Greek Old Testament to speak of marital separation.

In itself, using a secular word for "divorce" rather than a biblical word is not wrong. When Paul discusses divorce in 1 Corinthians 7, he uses the words *αφιημι* and *χοριζω*, neither of which is an Old Testament word for "divorce." But the Pharisees are not just discussing divorce. They are citing Deuteronomy 24. Because they substitute a new word in an old passage, that word attracts the Lord's attention. "So you Pharisees want to talk about 'dismissing' a wife?" he might say. "Then let me tell you what the Law says about 'dismissing.'" Once we realize that he is playing with their new word, we can understand his answer in a new way.

9.3.2 Some Meanings of "Dismiss"

Scholars who try to explain the puzzle of Matt. 5:32 usually concentrate their attention on the fornication clause. Instead, we study *απολυω* "dismiss," the Greek counterpart of the strange word for "divorce" that the Pharisees introduce and that the Lord picks up in answering them. It never means "divorce" in the Greek Old Testament, but does have two meanings of interest to us.

The literal meaning of *απολυω* is "dismiss." This meaning appears, for example, in the title to Psalm 34 (Ps. 33:1 in the Septuagint):

A Psalm of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, who drove him away ["dismissed him"], and he departed.

The title alludes to the episode recorded in 1 Sam. 21:10-22:1. David, fleeing from Saul, seeks refuge with Achish, king of the Philistines. (The word "Abimelech" in the title of the Psalm is not a name, but a title, just as "Pharaoh" is the title of the kings of Egypt.) The men of Achish recognize David as an enemy. To escape, David pretends that he is insane, and Achish, in disgust, sends him away. The title to the psalm describes this sending away with "dismiss."

It is easy to see how "dismiss" comes to describe divorce, where a man "dismisses" a woman from his household. The word develops this meaning by New Testament times, but the Old Testament never uses it in this sense.

The other Old Testament meaning of "dismiss" of interest to us appears in Gen. 15:2. Our translation here follows the Septuagint, which differs slightly from the Hebrew.

Table 6: Biblical Terms for Divorce

English	Hebrew	Greek
certificate of divorce	<i>sepher keritut</i>	<i>biblion apostasion</i>
send out, put away	<i>shillac</i>	<i>apostellein, exapostellein</i>
depart	<i>yatsa', hotsi'</i>	<i>exerchomai, aperchomai, ekballo, ekfero</i>

*And Abram said, "Lord God, what will you give me? For I am **dismissed** childless, and the son of Masek of those born in my house is this Eliezer of Damascus."*

Abram is saying, "I am going to die without any children, and according to custom, one of the children of my slaves will be my heir." The text uses the verb "to be dismissed" as a euphemism for death.

Another example is Num. 20:28-29 (again translated from the Septuagint),

*And Aaron died upon the top of the mount. . . . And all the congregation saw that Aaron was **dismissed**, and all the house of Israel mourned Aaron thirty days.*

God tells Moses and Aaron that Aaron's time has come to die. They ascend Mount Hor, where Aaron expires. Again, "to be dismissed" means "to die."

So the word "dismiss" can mean "dismiss from life." It is used this way in the New Testament. Luke's gospel records how the aged Simeon greets the infant Jesus in the temple. God promised Simeon that he would not die until he saw the Messiah, and now the promise is fulfilled. So Simeon prays,

*Now **dismiss** your servant, Lord, according to your word, in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation (Luke 2:29-30).*

Simeon knows that his time has come. With the words, "Dismiss your servant," he invites the Lord to take him.

The notes contain further examples of this use of apoluo from pagan Greek writers.

9.3.3 The Answer to the Puzzle

We now know two important facts about apoluo "dismiss."

1. It is used in the New Testament, but never in the Old Testament, to describe marital separation. Thus it attracts the Lord's attention when the Pharisees use it to paraphrase the Mosaic Law on divorce.
2. In both Testaments, it can mean "dismiss from life."

If we keep these two meanings in mind as we read Matt. 5:32, the puzzle about fornication becomes much clearer. We can now understand how fornication prevents a dismissed wife from committing adultery.

Whoever dismisses his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery.

There are two ways in which a man may "dismiss" his wife. He may "divorce" her, putting her out of his house. In this case he causes her to commit adultery, for she will be without support unless she remarries. But if she is guilty of fornication, he has another option. Deuteronomy 22 says that a married woman who commits fornication should be stoned to death. (Recall our study in Chapter 4) If she is guilty of fornication, he may "dismiss" her from life by having her tried and stoned. In this case he does not cause her to commit adultery, for she is dead and so cannot remarry.

The law of Deuteronomy 22 prescribes stoning not only for adultery (unfaithfulness after betrothal or marriage), but also for uncleanness before marriage that is concealed from the bridegroom. The word "fornication" covers both of these cases, and so the Lord uses it in his instruction.

The second part of the Lord's teaching is also clear.

And whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery.

Remarriage is possible only when the woman is "dismissed" in such a way as to leave her alive. Whenever the woman survives her "dismissal," remarriage is adultery, both for her and for her new spouse. When a woman is "dismissed" by stoning because of fornication, though, the question of remarriage does not arise.

The Lord thus rejects the Pharisees' notion that God sanctions divorce. Divorce and remarriage is adultery. By introducing the case of fornication, with its associated penalty of stoning, he emphasizes that only death can break the marriage bond. His answer reflects not only the Old Testament notion that "the Lord hates divorce" (Mal. 2:16), but also the law that condemns impure wives to death (Deuteronomy 22).

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is puzzling about the fornication clause in Matt. 5:32?
2. What are the two parts of each contrast in Matt. 5:21-48?
3. Which part of each contrast amplifies Matt. 5:17-19?
4. Which part of each contrast amplifies Matt. 5:20?
5. What is the source of Matt. 5:31?
6. What is the relationship of Matt. 5:32 to the Old Testament?
7. Where do the Pharisees get their word for "divorce"?
8. What are two possible meanings of "dismiss" in the time of Christ?

9. How does the ambiguity in the meaning of "dismiss" help resolve the puzzle about the fornication clause?

NOTES

9.4 Further Evidence for “Depart” = “Die”

The assertion that ἀπολυω "depart" can describe death is central to the interpretation of the fornication clause advanced in this chapter. In addition to the biblical examples discussed above, several passages in secular Greek clearly show this usage for ἀπολυω and its cognates.

In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, written in the fifth century before Christ, Creon the king stubbornly drives his son Haemon to suicide, and then laments over him,

Alas, alas.

You have died; *you have departed*,

By my folly, not your own (1267-1269).

The italicized words translate the aorist passive indicative of ἀπολυω. A few lines later, Creon learns that his queen has also died, and asks for details in the words,

How then *did she depart?* (1314)

This time, the verb appears in the aorist middle.

The other classical examples of this usage come from the fourth century before Christ, and all involve the noun ἀπολυσις "departure, which is a close derivative of ἀπολυω, the verb that we are studying.

- Diogenes Laertius, in his biography of the philosopher Lyco, includes a copy of this philosopher's will. Lyco stipulates that, "after my *departure*," one of his brothers should dispose of oil from his olive trees in a certain way (5.71). The noun ἀπολυσις is here used in a legal document to specify decease.
- The naturalist Theophrastus describes a poison, compounded of hemlock, poppy, and other herbs, that "produces an easy and painless *departure*" (*Enquiry into Plants*, 9.16.8).
- Aristotle, in discussing the nature of death, claims that "death in old age is painless. ... The *departure* of the soul happens utterly without sensation" (*On Respiration*, 479a.22).

Table 7 summarizes these examples and those from the Bible.

Table 7: Classical and Biblical Instances of ἀπολυω and Cognates

Life of Lyco 5.71	ἀπολυσις
Enquiry into Plants 9.16.8	ἀπολυσις
On Respiration 479a.22	ἀπολυσις
Antigone 1268	ἀπολυω aor. pass. ind.
Antigone 1314	ἀπολυω aor. mid. ind.
Gen 15:2	ἀπολυω pres. mid./pass. ind.
Num 20:29	ἀπολυω aor. pass. ind.
Luke 2:29	ἀπολυω pres. act. ind.
Matt 5:32; 19:9	ἀπολυω aor. act. subj.

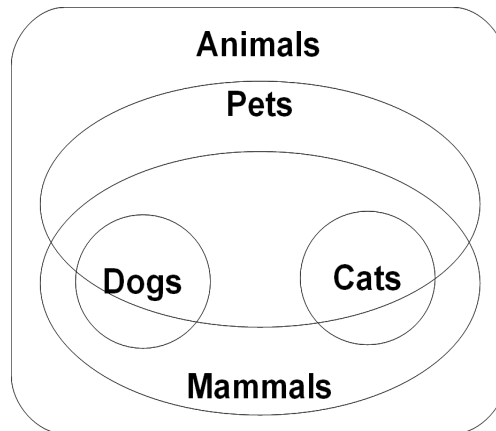


Figure 1: Relationships among nouns

The first three examples are instances of the verbal noun *απολυσις* "departure" in the sense of "death." The next four, including two from pagan authors and two from the Septuagint, use the middle or passive voice of the verb to describe the death of the subject of the verb. The last two use the active voice to describe the death of the object of the verb.

9.5 Other Explanations of the Fornication Clause

Seven major views of the fornication clause have been proposed.² The main differences among the views are in the interpretation of the word "fornication"³ and the scope of the exception clause (whether it authorizes only divorce, divorce and remarriage, or something altogether different). The views agree with one another, and differ with my interpretation, in understanding the "putting away" as a legal separation that leaves both people alive.

9.5.1 The Meaning of "Fornication"

The exception assumes that one party in the marriage is guilty of something called "fornication." What does this term describe? How does it differ from other kinds of sexual conduct condemned by the Bible, such as incest, prostitution, adultery, or homosexual behavior? We are particularly interested in its relationship to adultery, which describes a relation between a married person and someone other than the other member of that marriage.

To understand the different answers to this question, we need to understand some distinctions that are used in studying meaning in language. When two different words describe related concepts, they can be related in different ways. We can illustrate these different relationships⁴ by comparing the word "dog" with the words "cat," "mammal," and "pet."

- "Dog" and "cat" are mutually exclusive. If something is a dog, it cannot be a cat, and *vice versa*.

² I follow the convenient summary in Heth 1982:101-107. For the five major variants, see Steele and Ryrie 1983:85-98. Heth and Wenham 1984 offer a more thorough discussion, and references.

³ πορνεία

⁴ We are discussing what a linguist calls the extensional meaning of a noun, that is, the set of things to which it applies. The study of meaning also includes intensional meaning, which is defined by the concept to which a word refers. For our purposes, we need only consider extensional meaning.

- In contrast, “mammal” and “dog” are not mutually exclusive. Every dog is also a mammal, as is every cat. However, not every mammal is a dog or a cat. Some mammals are squirrels, ferrets, or whales.
- The relation between “pet” and “dog” is of yet another kind. Some dogs are pets, but others (wild dogs) are not pets. Similarly, some pets are dogs, but some are cats, and some (goldfish, for example) aren't even mammals at all.

Sometimes it is helpful to represent relationships like these with a picture, as in Figure 1, technically called a Venn diagram. Imagine that all the objects we want to describe are spread out on the table, and we draw lines around those to which a given name applies. The three kinds of relations we have described correspond to three different kinds of relations between named areas. The areas containing dogs and cats do not intersect at all. The “dogs” area falls completely within the “mammals” area. The “dogs” and “pets” areas partially overlap, and are partially independent. It is customary in such diagrams to indicate the overall set of items (here “animals”) that the smaller curves distinguish.

Now we can be more precise in discussing the meaning of “fornication.” Let's spread out all possible instances of sexual sin on the table and draw lines around them corresponding to their names, just as we did for animals in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows two alternative relations that have been proposed between “fornication” and “adultery.”

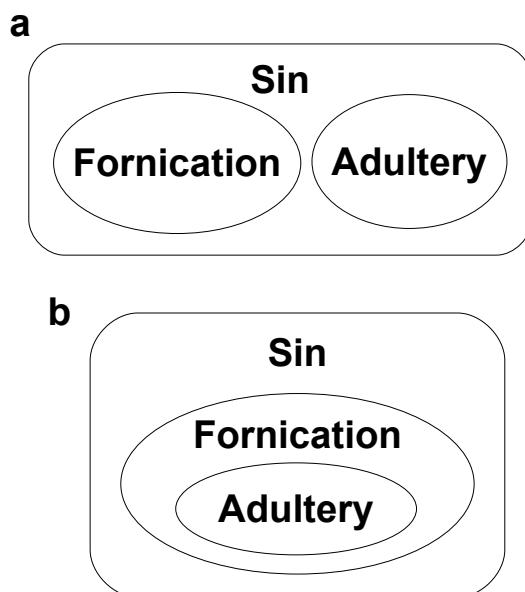


Figure 2: Alternative relations between “fornication” and “adultery”

Figure 2a understands fornication and adultery to be two distinct kinds of sexual sin.

The usual contrast consistent with Figure 2a is that fornication is between people who are not married, while adultery requires that one of the people in the sinful union be married (to somebody other than their partner in sin). This distinction is invoked by people who understand

the exception clause to deal with a woman who is found not to be a virgin on her marriage night, as envisioned in Deut 22:13, 14. Those who understand “fornication” in this way say that the Lord allows a husband to annul such a marriage. It rests on a deception, and so is not legally valid. Thus understood, the clause does not justify divorce.

Another contrast that has been proposed is that “fornication” refers to incest, specifically, the degrees of marriage forbidden in Leviticus 18. This position is usually based on the rule taken by the conference in Jerusalem in Acts 15:20, in which Gentiles were urged to “abstain from ... fornication” in order not to offend Jews unnecessarily. Again, the Lord's words are understood to authorize annulment of an illegal marriage, not the dissolving of a legitimate one.

These suggestions understand the word to refer to specifically Jewish legislation, and so explain why only Matthew, the most distinctly Jewish of the Gospels, includes the exceptive clause. However, this interpretation requires Matthew's readers to understand “fornication” as a technical term for specific sexual sins.

Other interpretations follow Figure 2b, which understands “fornication” to be a more general term for sexual sin, and “adultery” to be a specific kind of sin, in which one partner is married to somebody other than their partner in sin. Some interpreters think the Lord is referring to the “matter of uncleanness” described in Deut 24:1, a reference that we shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. In this case, “fornication” is just a general designation for any sexual sin. This interpretation lies behind the traditional position as well. Based on the exception for *fornication*, the Westminster Confession authorizes separation for *adultery*. This reasoning makes sense only if adultery is a form of fornication. Curiously, though, the Confession's very wording suggests that fornication can take place only before marriage, while adultery requires one member of the sinning couple to be married.

The biblical use of the word “fornication” is decidedly in favor of Figure 2b. The underlying Greek word and its relatives⁵ are used in the Bible to describe a wide range of illicit behaviors.

It is the most common family in the LXX to describe prostitution. It renders two Hebrew words, a common one⁶, and a rarer one, the feminine form of the adjective “holy,”⁷ reflecting the fact that ritual prostitution was a common part of the pagan religions of Canaan. Both Hebrew words appear in Hos 4:14, and the story of Judah and Tamar uses both the common secular word (Gen 38:15) and the religious one (Gen 38:21-22). Clearly, the sin of prostitution does not apply only to unmarried people, or only to incestuous relations. It is a vehicle for any form of illegitimate union.

Based on the use of the word family to describe prostitution, some might suggest that the Bible condemns only commercial impurity, not relations based on love between people who are not married to one another. This distinction is also not supported by the data. A common metaphor in the Old Testament presents the nation Israel as the wife of the Lord, and condemns her idolatry as spiritual fornication. Ezek 16:26, 29 uses this family of words of the nation, even while noting that she did not charge for her services, vv. 31-34.

5 The noun πορνῆ “harlot,” the adjective πορνικός “pertaining to a harlot,” and the verbs πορνεύω and εκπορνεύω “commit fornication, play the harlot”

6 The root זנה and its derivatives

7 קדשה

As Figure 2b suggests, fornication can be used of an unmarried person, to whom “adultery” is not applicable. A good example is Hos 4:14,

*I will not punish your daughters when they commit fornication,
nor your daughters in law when they commit adultery*

Hosea, like many of the prophets, presents his oracles in poetic form. The basic form of Hebrew poetry consists of paired lines that use different terms with closely related meanings. Here Hosea pairs “daughter” with “daughter in law,” and “fornication” with “adultery.” It certainly is appropriate for him to accuse a (virgin) daughter of fornication and a (married) daughter in law of adultery, but his usage does not argue for Figure 2a. The distinction of Figure 2b fits just as well, and the rules of Hebrew poetry require that he use a different but related word in the second line.

Ezekiel 16 shows that adultery is a specific kind of fornication, not distinct from it. The chapter frequently uses the “fornication” family of words to describe Judah's idolatry, all the while characterizing her as the wife of the Lord. In fact, after repeated descriptions of her sin as fornication, 16:32 describes her as “a wife that commits adultery.”

Fornication can be used even more broadly. Jude 7 uses the term to describe the characteristic sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, which according to the record in Genesis 19 was homosexual rape. The Damascus document, a Hebrew text used at Qumran around the first century, uses a common Hebrew equivalent⁸ of the Lord's word for fornication to describe polygamy, and perhaps incest and other sexual impurity.⁹

Clearly, “fornication” is a general word for any kind of sexual sin. Adultery, homosexuality, polygamy, and incest, as well as premarital relations, are all called “fornication” in the Bible and other Jewish literature of the first century. Given this broad usage, our Lord's words would be very misleading if he intended to allow divorce only in a specific technical situation such as incest or impurity before marriage. He chose the broadest term possible, and did not explain it in any way. The broad scope of “fornication” means that his words authorize putting away for any sexual impurity. We cannot evade their force (or the paradoxes they introduce) by trying to restrict the meaning of “fornication.” The word is a very general one, applicable to a wide range of lapses of purity. Certainly, it *includes* incest and premarital dalliances, but it can hardly be *restricted* to these senses, as the explanations based on Figure 2a suggest.

The broad scope of “fornication” is the meaning understood throughout the Roman world. That culture recognizes such conduct as grounds for divorce, and would understand Matthew's record of the Lord's teaching to endorse divorce in such cases. As we have seen, such an interpretation leads to inconsistencies, both within Matthew, and between Matthew and the other Synoptics.

So we see that attempts to explain the exception clause by restricting the meaning of “fornication” fail. Perhaps attempts based on the syntax of the verses will be more successful.

⁸ זנות, which is the Hebrew original behind nine of the instances of πορνεία in the LXX.

⁹ CD 4.20 clearly links the word to polygamy. Fitzmyer (Matthean Divorce Texts, 220-221) understands the scope of the saying to extend to 5.6-10, which refer to lying with a woman during her period and incestuous relations as well. The extension is rhetorically questionable, since the text goes on to discuss non-sexual sins such as impious speech (5.11-12), but the broad scope of זנות would certainly make the allusion possible in the mind of the writer.

	Matt 5:32	Matt 19:9
	I say to you	I say to you
a	Whoever dismisses his wife,	Whoever dismisses his wife
b	except for the cause of fornication,	except for fornication
c		and marries another
d	causes her to commit adultery	commits adultery
e	and whoever marries a dismissed woman	and he who marries a dismissed woman
f	commits adultery	commits adultery

Figure 3: The Scope of the Exception Clause

9.5.2 The Scope of the Clause

The exception clause describes conditions under which some other statement does not apply. By the “scope” of the exception clause, we mean the set of other statements that it qualifies, that is, the set of statements that do not apply when the exception is satisfied. Opinions differ as to just which other statements fall within its scope.

Let's begin by reviewing how exception clauses are used elsewhere in the Greek Bible.

First, an exception can come either before or after the clauses to which it gives an exception. An example of an exception that precedes its scope is 1 Cor 14:9:

*Unless you utter a clear word,
how will it be known what is said?*

An exception that follows its scope is Acts 26:29,¹⁰

*I pray to God that, sooner or later,
not only you but all those who hear me today might become such as I am,
except for these chains.*

Second, an exception is never separated from its scope by a conjunction (“and” or “but”).

Third, exceptions attached to conditional statements (as in the two verses we are considering in Matthew) are very rare, probably because the exception in itself amounts to a condition, and placing one condition on another is bound to be confusing. I have only found a few examples in the Greek Bible.

*if I come unto you speaking with tongues,
what shall I profit you,
unless I shall speak to you either
by revelation,
or by knowledge,
or by prophecy,
or by teaching? 1 Cor 14:6*

Also, if someone competes as an athlete, he is not crowned, unless he competes lawfully. 2 Tim 2:5

In both these cases, the exception follows the entire conditional sentence.

¹⁰ This example uses the uncommon exceptive word παρεκτος that appears in Matt 5:32.

Now, let's consider where the exception clauses fall in our verses in Matthew. Figure 3 enumerates the clauses, and shows various suggestions for the scope of the exception clause.

Both of Matthew's citations consist of two "if-then" sentences. In both cases, clauses a and d form the first sentence, and e and f form the second. Clause c is part of the first "if" in 19:9. For example, in 5:32, the first sentence might be paraphrased, "if someone dismisses his wife" (a), "then he causes her to commit adultery" (d).

The exception clause (b) comes immediately after the first "if" (a) in both cases. In 5:32, it also comes immediately before the first "then" (d), but in 19:9 it is separated from the first "then" by the extension of the "if" in c. Since the exception clause cannot be separated from its scope by a conjunction, in 19:9 its most natural scope is as shown by the bracket labeled 1, and this scope is consistent with 5:32 as well.

Based on the usage of exception clauses in the Greek Bible, this view of the scope of the exception is the most natural. The clause applies only to the "if" part of the first statement. Fornication permits the husband to dismiss his wife, but in any case she commits adultery if she remarries. The grammar is straightforward, but the meaning is confusing, Consider 5:32.

I say to you, "Whoever dismisses his wife, except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery."

The first husband "causes her to commit adultery" by leaving her without support, so that she must marry someone else if she is to survive, and this dilemma is the reason that the Lord gives in this verse for not divorcing. The exception clause can justify divorce only if it can remove the danger of adultery, yet the position of the exception means that it covers the divorce without the remarriage.

Under scope #2, fornication authorizes divorce and the remarriage of the first husband, but not of his wife. This situation is puzzling. He can remarry without committing adultery only if the marriage is dissolved. Yet then she ought to be able to remarry as well. Grammatically, scope #2 is unusual. If the Lord intended it, he would have put the exception clause after clause c.

Scope #3 allows her to remarry as well, but leads to the enigma that her new husband (clauses e and f) commits adultery by marrying her! Again, the grammar is unusual. Based on the examples of 1 Cor 14:6 and 2 Tim 2:5, we expect an exception governing an entire if-then sentence to follow the entire sentence.

Scope #4 has been suggested to avoid these semantic inconsistencies. It understands the exception to justify both the divorce and all subsequent remarriages. This is the view promoted by Erasmus. However, grammatically, it is the most unusual. The clearest way to provide an exception to both if-then sentences would be to repeat the exception clause at the end of each sentence.

Scope #5 extends the exception to the high-level statement, "I say to you." On this view, the Lord refuses to discuss the case of fornication at all. He intends no exception to the principles laid down in Mark and Luke. We might paraphrase, "Your scribes debate the impact of fornication on marriage. Let's leave that question aside for now. Whoever dismisses his wife causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery." Once more, the grammar is unusual. If the Lord meant to provide an exception to the entire

statement, one would expect the exception to be associated with the introduction, thus: “Except for fornication, I say to you, ...”

As the exception clause is commonly understood, only scopes #4 and #5 avoid the logical contradiction of allowing one divorced spouse to remarry, but condemning the other (or the other's new spouse) of adultery. However, the only scope that is consistent with the usage of exception clauses elsewhere in the Greek Bible is scope #1. It seems that we are forced to choose between an understanding that is grammatically sound but semantically confusing, and alternatives that are semantically consistent but grammatically irregular.

9.6 The Lord Jesus' Use of Figures

My solution to the problem of the fornication clause proposes that the Lord uses one word, *απολυω*, with a double sense. When we read the verses without the exception clause, the word means "divorce." In the case of fornication, though, it means "kill." Readers may reasonably ask whether there is precedent for the Lord's use of such wordplay, especially since it seems to obscure his instruction. In this note I

- **motivate** my explanation by observing some functions of figurative language;
- **analyze** the particular form of figure that the Lord is using; and
- **present** other examples of this figure, both on the Lord's lips, and elsewhere in the Bible.

9.6.1 Some Functions of Figures

Figures of speech are to language what herbs and spices are to food. They keep the hearer alert and interested, and whet his appetite to hear more. Like flavorings, they can be overused. Blatant, self-conscious wordplay attracts attention to itself and away from the message. Used skillfully, it makes the difference between boredom and brilliance.

Figures are verbal barbs, helping ideas to stick in the memory. If we examine any famous saying carefully, we will find some trope that has contributed to its persistence. Some figures, like metaphors and similes, do their work by drawing a word picture. Others catch our attention with repetition of similar sounds. Still others begin by puzzling us, forcing us to think twice (and thus remember them more thoroughly) in order to figure them out.

When figurative language requires extra thought, it can serve as a gate, excluding those who do not truly wish to understand and admitting only the interested. All three synoptic Gospels explicitly state that the Lord sometimes veils his teaching with rhetorical devices, particularly the parable (Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9,10).

In principle, then, the Lord's use of figures of speech should not surprise us, even if those figures sometimes require a second or a third reading to be understood. His frequent use of parables might even encourage us to expect an unusually high frequency of other rhetorical figures in his teaching.

9.6.2 What Is the Figure?

It is reasonable to expect figures of speech in the Lord's teaching, but we are not justified in forcing any figure we please on his speech. No one is surprised if we point out a parable, since

he commonly uses parables. In this study, we want to know whether the particular kind of figure suggested for Matt. 5:32 and 19:9 appears elsewhere in the Bible, and particularly in the Lord's teaching.

At first glance, the figure appears to be a *polysemantic pun*, a single word used with two meanings at the same time. However, the double meaning operates at a deeper level than single words. As Heth and Wenham 1985 frequently point out, all interpretations of the exceptive words except the Augustinian understand it as an elliptical clause. That is, the sense of the exception includes a repetition of "dismiss" from the main sentence. The full form of the verses would begin, "Whoever dismisses his wife, unless he dismisses her for fornication, ..." The second occurrence of "dismisses" drops out in the surface form of the sentence, but the sentence is understood as though it were present.

Our interpretation of the exception also relies on a second understood "dismisses." The difference in meaning is really between these two occurrences of the verb: "Whoever dismisses [= divorces] his wife, unless he dismisses [= executes] her for fornication, ..."

If we understand the Lord's figure here as the use of the same word twice in a sentence with different meanings, its classical name is *antanaclasis* or "word-clash" (Bullinger 1898:286). It is a variety of the more common *paronomasia*, where the two words need not be identical but may merely sound alike.

9.6.3 Related Figures in the Bible

Whether we class the Lord's figure of speech as a pun or as word-clash, it is not without parallel in the rest of the Bible.

Strict puns are comparatively rare in the Bible. Bullinger 1898 lists none in his encyclopedic survey of biblical figures of speech. Watson 1984:241-242 lists ten examples from the Old Testament, but comments that the figure "is not all that frequent; it took a skilled poet to exploit multiple meaning." Moule 1959:197 gives three examples from the New Testament.

One pun from the speech of Christ is John 6:29. The Jews ask, "What should we do, that we may work the works of God?" He replies, "This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he has sent." At first, they understand the phrase "work of God" to mean "a godly or righteous work." As he continues to teach, he uncovers a second, deeper sense in the words.

All whom the Father gave me shall come to me (6:37). No one is able to come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him (6:44).

Belief is not just a godly work that men do; it is ultimately a work that God himself performs in the hearts of men. As the Jews use the phrase "work of God," they understand it in the first sense, and the Lord in repeating it in his response invites them to understand it the same way. His subsequent teaching shows that he has a second meaning in mind for it as well.

The Lord also uses a pun in his interview with Nicodemus in John 3. His famous phrase "born again" can also be translated "born from above." Both meanings fit well in the context, and the Lord probably intends Nicodemus to understand them both. The same chapter also contains a play on the two meanings of the Greek word πνευμα, "wind" and "spirit" (John 3:8).

One of the examples given by Moule is the word υψωω "to lift up," which appears on the Lord's lips in John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32. The immediate reference in each case is to the physical

elevation of the Lord's body on the cross, but lurking not too far in the background is the notion of the exaltation and glorification of Christ that paradoxically results from that humiliating death.

Word-clash and paronomasia are more common than simple puns in the Bible. Bullinger lists numerous examples. One example on the lips of the Lord in Matthew's gospel is Matt. 8:22. A disciple asks leave to bury his father before following the Lord, who replies, "Let the dead bury their dead." The second occurrence of "dead" refers to someone physically dead (in this case, the disciple's father), while the first occurrence refers to spiritual death. The shift in the sense of the word makes the phrase far more interesting and memorable than it would be if the Lord had spelled out the meaning explicitly.

The words of Christ as recorded in the Gospels are not plodding prose platitudes, but the work of a master teacher. Paul may bore his hearers to sleep (Acts 20:9), but the Lord never fails to seize their attention. Like any good speaker, he sometimes uses words with multiple senses to add spice (and perhaps a bit of a puzzle) to his teaching. The use of a pun or word-clash in the divorce texts is neither unprecedented nor unexpected on the lips of Christ.

CHAPTER 10 OUR LORD'S CONVERSATIONS ON DIVORCE

The Lord Jesus delivers the Sermon on the Mount near the beginning of his public ministry, just after calling his twelve disciples. We have seen how he challenges the Pharisees' understanding of divorce. They think that a marriage can be dissolved so that both partners may remarry. By playing on their word for "divorce," he shows that the Old Testament Law allows separation only in the case of fornication. In such circumstances, according to Deuteronomy 22, the guilty party is stoned, and the question of remarriage does not arise.

About three years later, toward the end of his ministry, the Pharisees directly challenge the Lord about marriage and divorce. In the course of the conversation, recorded in Matt. 19:1-12 and Mark 10:1-12, the Lord again rejects their understanding of Deuteronomy 24. In this chapter,

- we discuss the **setting** of the conversation,
- then study the **conversation** itself and
- the Lord's **comments** afterwards to his disciples.
- Finally, we look briefly at **another conversation** between the Lord and the Pharisees, recorded in Luke's Gospel.

10.1 The Setting

In the Gospels, the Jewish leaders often try to force the Lord into a position that will make enemies for him. They spring one of these traps as he travels from Galilee to Jerusalem just before his crucifixion.

Several roads lead from Galilee in the northern part of Israel to Jerusalem in the center. Both Galilee and Jerusalem are west of the Jordan River, so most routes stay on the west side of the Jordan. One very popular route, though, is east of the Jordan, through the territory of Perea. The Lord follows the eastern route on his last journey to Jerusalem (Matt. 19:1; Mark 10:1).

The ruler of Perea is Herod Antipas, who beheaded John the Baptist. Herod did not dislike John, and in fact rather enjoyed listening to him preach (Mark 6:20). But John spoke out against Antipas' marriage to Herodias, whom he had seduced to divorce her first husband so that he could take her. John's preaching convicted Herodias, and to silence the prophet, she persuaded Antipas to imprison John and later to execute him (Mark 6:17-28).

The Pharisees know that divorce is a sensitive subject in Perea. They also know that the Lord's position on divorce, as presented in the Sermon on the Mount, is similar to John's. When they find Christ in this region, they try to lure him into saying something about divorce that will enrage Herod's wife, so that she will destroy him as she did John. Matthew and Mark record portions of the resulting conversation.

10.2 The Conversation with the Pharisees

The two interpretations of Deut. 24:1-4 differ on whether Moses considers divorce as a legitimate option in marriage, or whether he merely takes its effects into account. Twice in the conversation between Christ and the Pharisees, this contrast becomes apparent. The Pharisees

introduce the contrast to bait the Lord into condemning divorce. Later, he turns the contrast against them.

10.2.1 The Pharisees Challenge the Lord

Mark 10:2-4 records how the Pharisees introduce the contrast at the opening of the conversation.

The Pharisees . . . asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to dismiss his wife?", tempting him.

*And he, answering, said unto them, "What did Moses **command** you?"*

*And they said, "Moses **allowed** to write a bill of divorcement, and to dismiss."*

The Pharisees set their trap by asking whether divorce is lawful. They do not expect the Lord to say "Yes," because they think he holds the same view that John did. If the Lord says "No," they will report him to Herod. The Lord detects their malice, and answers by asking them what Moses commands.

Like most Jews of their day, the Pharisees believe that Moses not only allowed, but in fact commanded, divorce. However, they hesitate to press this point, since they wish to lead the Lord into a clear condemnation of divorce. To elicit the Lord's view, they must make the law seem ambiguous and invite his interpretation. So they respond, "Moses **allowed** to write a bill of divorcement."

Since they invite an interpretation, the Lord gives them one.

Jesus answered and said unto them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this precept"

(Mark 10:5).

That is, Moses knew that the people had hard hearts, and that they would stumble into divorce. He wrote Deut. 24:1-4 to tell people what to do when they find themselves in such a circumstance. But God never intended that man and wife should separate. Christ reminds the Pharisees that the same Moses who wrote Deut. 24:1-4 also recorded the institution of marriage in Genesis:

"From the beginning of creation God made them male and female. Because of this a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. So then they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:6-9).

10.2.2 The Lord Takes Control

The Pharisees want the Lord to comment on Deuteronomy 24 and divorce. The Lord deflects their attention to Genesis 3 and marriage. Frustrated, they try to pull him back to Deuteronomy. They carelessly drop their guard, and show their real attitude toward the passage by calling it a **command**. Matthew records this part of the conversation.

*[The Pharisees] say unto him, "Why did Moses then **command** to give a writing of divorcement, and to dismiss away?" He says unto them, "Moses because of your hardness of heart **allowed** you to dismiss your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:7,8).*

The Lord answers, not by opposing Moses, but by opposing their interpretation. They claim, "Moses commanded." He responds, "Moses allowed." Moses' legislation does not command divorce. It only makes allowance for it, by telling people what to do if they are divorced.

The Pharisees see divorce as a right guaranteed by the Law, following the three law interpretation of Deuteronomy 24. The Lord says that it merely makes provision for man's sin. He supports the interpretation of the entire paragraph as a single command.

The Lord has taken control of the conversation. From this position of strength he delivers his teaching:

And I say to you, "Whoever dismisses his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery, and he who marries a dismissed woman commits adultery" (Matt. 19:9).

Ironically, this is probably just the sort of strong statement that the Pharisees originally hoped to elicit from him. Yet he delivers it only after making clear to them who is in control. His control extends beyond them to Herod, for in spite of their malice, they do not succeed in bringing John's fate upon him.

The Lord's teaching on divorce here is similar to that in the Sermon on the Mount. He again uses the Pharisees' word for divorce, meaning literally "dismiss." He again says that it is adultery to marry a dismissed woman. Going beyond the Sermon on the Mount, he adds that the husband who dismisses her and marries someone else commits adultery, unless he dismisses her for fornication. Once again, we understand from Deuteronomy 22 that in the case of fornication she is dead, and there is no danger of adultery.

10.3 The Comments to the Disciples

The Lord's teaching is strict. Unlike the Pharisees, he forbids divorce and remarriage. The disciples have heard the Lord's position before, in the Sermon on the Mount. That sermon touched on so many themes that they may have overlooked how strict his position is. Now they hear it again, all by itself, as he explains it to the Pharisees. They are shocked, and ask him two questions about it.

10.3.1 The Disciples Ask about Remarriage

Mark records the disciples' first question.

And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter (Mark 10:10).

They wonder if they have heard him correctly, and ask him to repeat his teaching once more. He responds with the same conclusion he gave the Pharisees, elaborated a little.

*And he says to them,
"Whoever dismisses his wife, and marries another,
commits adultery against her,
and if a woman dismisses her husband and is
married to another,
she commits adultery" (Mark 10:11-12).*

For the first time, the Lord adds a comment about a woman who divorces her husband. Neither the husband nor the wife can initiate divorce and then remarry.

Mark does not mention the exception for fornication. In the next chapter, we will see that Mark may leave it out because his audience would not understand it. In any event, the disciples

now know that they have heard correctly. The Lord does forbid divorce and remarriage, in the strongest possible terms.

10.3.2 The Disciples Ask about Celibacy

The disciples' next question shows that they have always thought of divorce as a possible escape from a bad marriage.

His disciples say to him, "If the case of the man be so with the wife, it is not expedient to marry" (Matt. 19:10).

If there really is no escape from marriage other than death, then one had better remain unmarried.

The disciples' suggestion shows how strong they understand the Lord's teaching to be. Some modern readers may try to find loopholes in the Lord's words. To the disciples, who hear the teaching over and over and discuss it with the Lord, there are no loopholes. The Lord's answer to their comment certainly doesn't add any, either.

He said to them, "Not all receive this word, but those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let him who is able to receive it, receive it" (Matt. 19:11-12).

Their analysis is correct, as far as it goes. He who can follow it, should. But the disciples need to realize that not everyone can live a godly life as a single person. Celibacy requires a special gift from God. Most people should marry—and marry with the understanding that only death can end their union.

10.4 Another Conversation with the Pharisees

Luke records another conversation between the Lord and the Pharisees in which the subject of divorce comes up. This conversation probably occurs in the period between the Sermon on the Mount and the encounter in Perea. The main subject of the conversation is not divorce, but money.

As Luke 16 opens, the Lord is talking to his disciples. He tells them a story about an unjust steward, and concludes, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13). The Pharisees are listening in, and offer their opinion.

And the Pharisees also, being covetous, heard all these things, and they derided him (Luke 16:14).

The Lord responds to their mockery by condemning them:

You are they who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God (Luke 16:15).

The Pharisees despise him for warning against material wealth, but God despises that wealth, for it steals men's affection from him.

The Pharisees' carnality is all the more despicable, because most people receive the preaching of the kingdom eagerly.

The Law and the Prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presses into it (Luke 16:16).

The multitudes gladly hear the Lord and follow him. Their commitment is not always deep, but they do not immediately reject him as the Pharisees do.

To point up their sinfulness, the Lord issues his teaching on divorce. God's law cannot fail. As an example, the Lord mentions marriage.

It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the Law to fall. Every one dismissing his wife and marrying another commits adultery, and every one marrying a woman dismissed from a husband commits adultery (Luke 16:17,18).

His comment rests on the understanding that the Pharisees do not accept his teaching on divorce. By their position on divorce they reject God's law. This rejection reveals their wickedness and assures their judgment.

The conversation in Luke 16 is the third context where we find the Lord presenting the same position on divorce and remarriage. Its repetition in different settings shows that this teaching is not a casual comment. It is a principle that is as important to the Lord as it is foreign to the teaching of the Pharisees.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why do the Pharisees want the Lord to make a statement about divorce in Matthew 19 and Mark 10?
2. Please explain how the difference between saying "Moses commands divorce" and saying "Moses allows divorce" corresponds with the two interpretations of Deuteronomy 24 that we studied in Chapter 5
3. How do the disciples' questions confirm the strictness of the Lord's teaching?
4. What suggestion do the disciples make to avoid marital problems?
5. What does the Lord think of their suggestion?

CHAPTER 11 SUMMARIZING THE LORD'S TEACHING ON DIVORCE

The Lord's four sayings on divorce sound similar to one another. They are made up of similar pieces, such as "Whoever dismisses his wife ...," "except for fornication ...," and "commits adultery" No one saying has all of the pieces, and no piece appears in all four sayings.

The Lord's sayings about divorce are like salads assembled at a salad bar with five ingredients. Each ingredient is a different idea about divorce. Each saying combines two or three different ingredients. In the last two chapters, we considered each saying in its own context. Now we bring all of them together to study the individual ingredients and to see the complete picture of divorce and remarriage that they present.

In this chapter

- we reprint each **complete saying**, identifying the different ideas that it contains.
- Then we gather together the similar parts from the different sayings so that we can understand the **ingredients**.

11.1 Identifying the Pieces of the Sayings

We will quote each of the sayings, breaking it into parts and marking each with a capital letter. Some of the letters will occur in more than one saying. Those sayings have parts in common.

Matt. 5:31-32

I say to you,

- A* *Whoever dismisses his wife,*
- B* *except for the cause of fornication,*
- A* *causes her to commit adultery,*
- C* *and whoever marries a dismissed woman commits adultery."*

The saying in the Sermon on the Mount has three ideas.

- A A dismissed woman commits adultery when she remarries, and the man who divorces her shares in the guilt of that adultery.
- B Fornication prevents this adultery.
- C The second husband of a dismissed woman commits adultery by marrying her.

Matt. 19:9

I say to you,

- D* *Whoever dismisses his wife,*
- B* *except for fornication,*
- D* *and marries another, commits adultery,*
- C* *and he who marries a dismissed woman commits adultery.*

When the Lord speaks to the Pharisees in Perea, he introduces a new idea:

- D The man who dismisses his wife commits adultery when he remarries.

He also repeats two of the ideas from the Sermon on the Mount:

- B Fornication again prevents adultery in remarriage.

C The second husband of a dismissed woman commits adultery by marrying her. He does not repeat the teaching that the dismissed wife commits adultery in remarrying.

Mark 10:11-12

He says to them,

- D *"Whoever dismisses his wife, and marries another, commits adultery against her,*
- E *and if a woman dismisses her husband and is married by another, she commits adultery."*

After speaking with the Pharisees in Perea, the Lord explains matters further to his disciples.

- D He repeats what he told the Pharisees about the remarriage of the first husband.
- E A woman who initiates a divorce and remarries commits adultery.

Luke 16:18

- D *Every one dismissing his wife and marrying another commits adultery,*
- C *and every one marrying a woman dismissed from a husband commits adultery.*

In the conversation with the Pharisees recorded by Luke, the Lord says the same things that he said to the Pharisees in Perea, but without the clause about fornication.

11.2 Interpreting the Pieces of the Sayings

We have identified five ingredients in the salad bar, five main ideas from which the Lord builds his sayings. Now we can look at each ingredient by itself.

The Divorcee (A) – In Matt. 5:32, the Lord teaches that divorce causes the divorced woman to commit adultery by remarrying. He takes it for granted that a divorcee will remarry, for she needs a husband to support her. When she does remarry, she commits adultery. It does not matter whether her first husband was justified in divorcing her or not. Perhaps he abused her and made her life miserable, then discarded her for someone else. Still, she cannot remarry innocently. In God's eyes, she is still his wife and he is still her husband. Furthermore, the first husband shares in the guilt of her adulterous remarriage, because he opened the door to that marriage by divorcing her in the first place.

The Fornication Clause (B) – Both times that Matthew cites the Lord's sayings on divorce, he includes the fornication clause. Furthermore, only Matthew cites the clause. Mark and Luke never mention it. Why does it occur only part of the time?

Perhaps the difference goes back to the Lord himself. No two Gospels cite exactly the same saying. Matthew quotes the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's words to the Pharisees in Perea. Mark quotes the Lord's later explanation to the disciples in Perea, while Luke records an entirely different conversation. The Lord may have used the phrase in two instances, and not in the other two.

We are at a loss, though, to know why he would not use it every time. The same ideas occur in Matt. 19:9 and Luke 16:18, except that Matthew adds the fornication clause. The audience (the Pharisees) is the same in both cases. There is no clear motive for the Lord to include the saying one time but not the other.

Two facts suggest another explanation. The two facts are:

1. The fornication clause assumes that the reader or hearer understands the laws of fornication defined in Deuteronomy 22. Only in the light of these laws can we understand how a woman can be "dismissed" for fornication and not commit adultery by remarrying.
2. Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. It presents the Lord to a Jewish audience as the fulfillment of the Messianic promises of the Old Testament. Mark and Luke are written to more general audiences, audiences that include Greek and Roman readers who will not understand the Old Testament very well.

Matthew includes the fornication clause because his Jewish readers should know Deuteronomy 22 and catch the Lord's pun on "dismiss." Gentile readers, not knowing that the Law requires a fornicator to be stoned, might misunderstand the clause and think that it justifies remarriage in the case of fornication. This is exactly what the Lord does **not** teach. Mark and Luke, keeping their Gentile audience in mind, avoid possible misunderstanding by leaving the clause out.

The Second Spouse (C) – Matt. 5:32, Matt. 19:9, and Luke 16:18 all affirm that the second husband of a divorced woman commits adultery. This teaching is just the other side of the coin to A. She still belongs to her first husband, and the second husband violates that sacred union by taking her to himself.

The Divorcing Husband (D) – Matt. 19:9, Mark 10:11, and Luke 16:18 agree that the man who divorces his wife still belongs to her, and is not free to remarry. In spite of a man's best efforts to break the marriage bond, it remains intact before God. It does not matter how miserable the wife makes the husband, or how grievously she has wronged him. He is hers as surely as she is his. Fornication may separate them, if it is dealt with according to the Law, for then one spouse will die. But it is death, not a man-made divorce, that ends the union. By omitting the fornication clause, Mark and Luke warn us that Gentile responses to fornication, such as separation without capital punishment, do not justify remarriage.

The Divorcing Wife (E) – Most of the Lord's sayings are phrased in terms of a man's divorcing his wife. This form of divorce was the most common one in the first century A.D.. However, the principles remain valid whoever initiates the separation. Mark 10:12 emphasizes this symmetry by rephrasing idea D in terms of a woman who seeks the divorce.

Each component of the Lord's teaching emphasizes that marriages are made in heaven, but divorce is a purely human product. Every party involved in divorce and remarriage is guilty of adultery. The Lord condemns the mate who initiates the divorce, and (if remarriage follows the separation) the one who is put away and the second partner. The fornication clause seems to make an exception. But it was only recorded for Jewish audiences, and they should know from their own Scriptures that fornication leads, not to divorce, but to death.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is the fornication clause only in Matthew?
2. What parties in divorce and remarriage are guilty of adultery?
3. What exceptions justify divorce and remarriage?

CHAPTER 12 PAUL'S TEACHING ON DIVORCE

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives the most extended discussion of marriage in the New Testament. Most readers think of this chapter as the one where Paul tells people to remain single if they possibly can. One verse even seems to give people married to unbelievers an excuse to end their marriage and begin another:

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart. The brother or sister is not enslaved in such cases (1 Cor. 7:15).

When we examine this verse in its context, we see that it makes provision for separation under special circumstances. It does not allow remarriage. We examine three contexts of the verse.

- **The entire chapter** is often misunderstood. Its purpose is not to urge people to remain single, but to encourage them to consider marriage.
- The **paragraph** containing verse 15 encourages people in bad marriages to persevere, and takes away some excuses they might have for seeking a divorce.
- When we contrast verse 15 with **another verse** in the chapter, we see that Paul does not allow remarriage.

12.1 A Chapter for Lovers

When it comes to marriage, Paul has a reputation as a spoil-sport. Most people think of him as a crochety old bachelor who views romantic love as a snare of the devil. If you ask for evidence, they turn to 1 Corinthians 7 and point out such gems as "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (verse 1), "He who causes her to marry does well, but he who does not cause her to marry does better" (verse 38), and "She is happier if she abides [unmarried]" (verse 40).

This impression is superficial and misleading. We can see this by examining some contradictions to which it leads, reconstructing the correspondence that leads to this chapter, tracing parallels between it and the Lord's teaching on individual gifts for marriage and celibacy, and identifying Paul's real objective.

12.1.1 Some Puzzles in 1 Corinthians 7

The conventional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 leads to puzzling contradictions, both within the chapter and with other writings by Paul.

Puzzles Within — Paul begins, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman (1 Cor. 7:1b)." These words seem to advocate the single life. However, if they do, the next sentence is very strange.

Nevertheless, because of fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2).

Instead of building on the theme of celibacy, he immediately says that everybody should be married. Furthermore, verses 3 through 5 show that he is not talking about platonic unions.

The internal puzzle lies in the tension between the first two verses of the chapter. If Paul wants Christians to stay single, why does he write verse 2? If he wants them to marry, why does he write verse 1?

Puzzles Without — If Paul is so much against marriage in 1 Corinthians, he changes his tune in later Epistles.

- He condemns false teachers who "forbid to marry" (1 Tim. 4:3).
- He advises "that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house" (1 Tim. 5:14).
- He even uses marriage as a picture of Christ's union with his church (Eph. 5).

Perhaps he changed his mind! Then again, perhaps the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7 is incorrect.

12.1.2 Reconstructing a Lost Letter

Paul's words seem puzzling because, as 1 Cor. 7:1 tells us, they are only one half of a conversation. Paul begins the chapter, "Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me." He is responding to a letter from the Corinthians. We can understand his answer better when we reconstruct their views. What sort of letter from them could lead to the contrasting statements with which Paul begins his response?

Imagine that the Corinthians wrote something like this to Paul:

Dear Paul,

You're going to be so proud of us! The Lord has led us to new heights of devotion and spirituality. We are the bride of Christ, and we have resolved to belong to no one but him. All the single folks in the church reject the prospect of marriage. Isn't that great? Marriage is just a concession to the flesh, and we are above such temptations. The married Christians are a bit sad that they didn't see these truths earlier, before they succumbed to the carnal lure of matrimony. To avoid sinning in the future, they have all agreed not to touch their spouses. From now on we are brothers and sisters in Christ, with no thought of unholy desire to cloud our Christian love.

In Christ,

Your Friends at Corinth

How would Paul respond?

He cannot endorse such a scheme. This is just the sort of heresy against which he writes in 1 Tim. 4:3. But the Corinthians are not heretics. They sincerely want to serve the Lord. Paul must correct their ideas gently, or he may alienate them.

Sometimes friends approach us with a very bad idea that they think is very good. We may respond, "That's a nice idea. But have you considered ... ?" We first try to find something good in what they say, something with which we can agree. Then we present the facts as we see them.

Paul uses this strategy in 1 Corinthians 7. His opening words are a summary of the Corinthians' position: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." There is something noble and exalted about the idea of Christians devoting themselves wholly to the service of God. In practice, though, this idea will not work. Celibacy does not quench physical appetites. It only

removes the legitimate channel for their expression. In theory, undivided devotion to God **looks** better than the distraction of marriage. In fact, marriage **is** better than the sin of fornication.

In the context of the Corinthians' letter, Paul's occasional negative comments about marriage in this chapter reflect, not a strong personal distaste for marriage, but his tact in dealing with that church. The amount of space he devotes to dissuading them from celibacy suggests that, far from condemning marriage, he in general approves it.

12.1.3 Building on the Lord's Teaching

The conversation we have just reconstructed between Paul and the Corinthians sounds familiar. We heard the same two positions in our Lord's conversation with his disciples in Matthew 19. As Table 8 shows, both the disciples in Matthew 19 and the Corinthians suggest celibacy as a general policy. Both the Lord and Paul caution their hearers not to go beyond their individual gifts.

Table 8: Cautions to Ascetic Students

Students: Let's all stay single	Disciples (Matt. 19:10)	Corinthians (Lost letter)
Teacher: Be sure of your gift	Lord Jesus (Matt. 19:11)	Paul (1 Cor. 7:7)

In Matthew 19, the disciples react to the Lord's teaching about divorce with the words,

If the case of the man be so with the wife, it is not expedient to marry (Matt. 19:10).

Like the Corinthians, they advocate celibacy. The Lord responds,

Not all receive this word, but those to whom it is given (Matt. 19:11).

He emphasizes that the single life is a gift from God.

Paul says the same thing.

Every one has his own gift from God (1 Cor. 7:7).

As God has distributed to every one, ... so let him walk (1 Cor. 7:17).

The Corinthians are trying to force all believers into a single mold. Some believers are gifted for celibacy. Others are gifted for marriage. All should live according to their gifts, not according to the latest "spiritual" fad.

12.1.4 Paul's Real Objective in 1 Corinthians 7

The puzzles produced by the conventional interpretation, our reconstruction of the letter from the Corinthians to Paul, and the relation between this chapter and Matthew 19 all show that Paul is not advocating universal celibacy. He expresses his real hopes for the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 7:32: "I want you to be without **care**."

Certainly, marriage brings cares.

*He who marries **cares** for the things of the world, how he will please his wife. ... She who marries **cares** for the things of the world, how she will please her husband (1 Cor. 7:33,34b).*

A faithful husband cares for maintaining a good income for his wife, so that she has a secure home for him and for their children. A faithful wife cares for keeping that home neat and comfortable, so that he can be happy. A believer who can live single can avoid these cares, and Paul wants the Corinthians to be without care.

But the single life also brings cares.

He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord, how he will please the Lord. . . . She who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit (1 Cor. 7:32,34a).

It is tempting to see these cares as signs of special piety, but Paul does not single them out as better than the cares of the married. He describes them with the same word, "cares," that he applies to married people. The cares of the unmarried result from natural appetites that have no proper channel for fulfillment. They are as undesirable as the care "for the things of the world" that the married believer may have.

Paul wants his readers to be free from care--not just the care of this world, but also the care of holiness in the face of unrelenting temptation. It takes a special gift from God to live single without the continuous distraction of desire. It also takes a special gift to live married without putting material security above spiritual values. Celibacy is not right for everybody, and nor is it universally wrong. "Every one has his own gift from God" (1 Cor. 7:7).

When we understand the Corinthians' question, we also understand the chapter. It is not a diatribe against marriage. In fact, it opposes those who would reject marriage for all people. The last thing we expect in such a chapter is encouragement for people to divorce. With this understanding of the chapter, we now turn to the paragraph containing the "divorce verse," 1 Cor. 7:15, and then to the verse itself.

12.2 The Separation Paragraph

Paul divides the church at Corinth into three groups: the "unmarried and widows" (7:8-9), the "married" (7:10-11), and the "rest" (7:12-16). The verses about the "rest" describe believers with unbelieving spouses, so the "married" must be believers married to other believers.

The question of divorce does not arise with the single believers, but Paul does discuss it with the two married groups. In the fervor of the celibacy fad at Corinth, married couples might misunderstand normal marital tensions as "chastisement" for the "sin" of marriage, and seek to dissolve their unions. Paul tells them to remain together, whether or not both spouses are believers.

12.2.1 Unmixed Homes, Verses 10-11

Paul first addresses believers married to other believers.

To the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, "Let not the wife depart from her husband. But if she should depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband. And let not the husband put away his wife" (1 Cor. 7:10-11).

Paul traces his instruction to the Lord's teaching in the Gospels, which is in turn an exposition of the Law of Moses. The Law allows marriages only between two Israelites, and the Lord's words also assume a Jewish context, in which both partners claim to be under the old covenant.

So they are a good basis for Paul's teaching to couples where both members profess salvation under the new covenant.

Paul adds nothing new to what we have already seen in the Gospels. Neither the husband nor the wife should initiate a separation. Even if they do separate, they are not free to remarry, except to one another.

12.2.2 Mixed Homes, Verses 12-16

The Law of Moses does not recognize marriages between believers and unbelievers. The Lord's teaching also does not directly address mixed marriages. When Paul speaks to believers with unbelieving spouses, he acknowledges that this revelation is new through him.

But to the rest speak I, not the Lord (1 Cor. 7:12).

His words are no less inspired than those uttered by Lord during his earthly ministry. Paul is commenting on the channel of revelation, not its authority.

Without this new revelation, believers would turn to the Old Testament for guidance about unbelieving spouses. There, they would learn from Ezra that God does not recognize mixed unions. In Corinth's rush to celibate bliss, the result would be a flood of divorces. To stop this tendency, the Lord gives new instruction through Paul.

The instruction has two parts. The first mentions an unsaved spouse who is happy to remain married to the believer. The second deals with an unbeliever who wants to leave. In both cases Paul tells the believer **what** to do, and gives **reasons** for keeping the home together.

The Happy Spouse (1 Cor. 7:12-14) — Ezra separated mixed couples because the civil authority, the restored Jewish commonwealth, could not sanction mixed marriages. In the New Testament, the civil authority is distinct from the church, and allows unions of believers and unbelievers. If the unbeliever is happy with the marriage, the believer should not end it.

If any brother has an unbelieving wife and she is pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman who has an unbelieving husband and he is pleased to dwell with her, let her not put him away (1 Cor. 7:12-13).

Corinthians who know their Old Testament might have misgivings about this instruction. The Mosaic Law provides that children whose ancestors treated Israel unkindly cannot become citizens of Israel for at least three generations (Deut. 23:7,8). Descendants of Ammonites and Moabites, ancient enemies of Israel, are excluded for ten generations (Deut. 23:3). Illegitimate children, of whatever ancestry, are also excluded (Deut. 23:2).

To Christians, these Old Testament teachings might suggest that God views children of mixed marriages as somehow inferior to those whose parents are both believers. So Paul goes on to explain that God will protect these children from the ungodly influence of the pagan spouse.

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified in the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified in the husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy (1 Cor. 7:14).

The believer should not leave the marriage, even for the sake of the children. God will see to it that the children are not polluted by the ungodly influence of the unsaved spouse.

The Unhappy Spouse — Sometimes the unbeliever does not want to stay with the believer. Paul's next instructions deal with this problem.

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart. The brother or sister is not enslaved in such cases (1 Cor. 7:15a).

The believer may feel bound to the duties of marriage, even toward a spouse who has abandoned the union. Paul relieves the Christian's conscience. If the unbeliever leaves, the believer is no longer responsible to consider the wishes and well-being of the partner, as in a normal marriage. The believing wife does not need to submit to her husband. The believing husband is no longer responsible to support his wife. The spouse who leaves no longer has the authority over the body of the believer that Paul describes in 1 Cor. 7:4.

This provision does not mean that Christians should make the home as unpleasant as possible in order to chase the unbeliever away.

But God has called us in peace (1 Cor. 7:15b).

Paul is not referring to the internal calm that comes from being no longer enslaved to a heathen spouse. "Peace" in Paul rarely if ever refers to internal peace of mind. He uses the word almost always to describe peace between individuals, such as man and God (Rom. 5:1) or among men (Rom. 14:19). Believers are to live in peace with all men (Rom. 12:18), including unbelieving spouses. The believer should do everything possible to make the unbeliever content and to preserve the marriage.

The greatest outcome, after all, would be the salvation of the unbeliever.

For how do you know, wife, whether you won't save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you won't save your wife? (1 Cor. 7:16)

The phrase "How do you know" is common in the Greek Old Testament. It almost always has a hopeful sense. We might paraphrase Paul's words,

You never know. You may be the means God will use to bring your spouse to salvation!

Peter, who frequently echoes Paul in his Epistles, may have this verse in mind when he writes,

Likewise, you wives, be in subjection to your own husbands, so that if some disobey the word, they may be won without a word through the conduct of the wives (1 Pet. 3:1).

The constant theme of 1 Cor. 7:10-16 is the permanence of marriage. Believers must never separate from other believers. If one spouse is unsaved, the believer should persevere in the marriage. If the unbeliever seeks a separation, the Christian should pray for the salvation of the unbeliever, and take advantage of any opportunity for a peaceful restoration of the marriage. Paul's instructions about reconciliation strongly suggest that verse 15 does not authorize remarriage for the believer. If the believer marries someone else, reconciliation becomes impossible, because of the requirements of Deuteronomy 24, and the believer's channel of influence on the unbeliever is broken.

12.3 Verse 15 AND Verse 39

The emphasis on peace and reconciliation in verses 15 and 16 is one reason to conclude that Paul does not mean verse 15a to permit the believer to remarry. Another reason emerges when we compare verse 15 with another verse in the chapter that explicitly does permit remarriage, verse 39.

The wife is bound by the Law as long as her husband lives. But if her husband is dead, she is free to marry whomever she wishes, only in the Lord (1 Cor. 7:39).

In this verse, being "bound" to a husband and being "free to marry" are opposites. If a woman is bound, she may not marry. If she is not bound, she may marry.

According to 1 Cor. 7:15, the believer is "not enslaved" if the unbeliever leaves. Is "not enslaved" the same as "not bound"? Does the deserted believer share the freedom of the widowed believer to remarry?

Many English translations emphasize the similarity of the two verses. In the AV, ASV, and NASB, the abandoned spouse is not under "bondage," while the widow is no longer "bound." The RSV and the NIV make the similarity even stronger, using "bound" in both verses.

In Greek, the two words are quite distinct. In verse 39, "bound" is the Greek word δεω, the same verb that Paul uses in Rom. 7:2 in a similar context:

*The woman who is under a husband is **bound** by the Law to her living husband. But if her husband should die, she is released from the law of her husband.*

The concrete sense of δεω is "to bind or tie." The death of one spouse unties this bond, dissolves the union, and leaves the survivor free to remarry.

The verb in verse 15 is δουλωω, meaning literally "to enslave." This verse is the only place in the Bible that the word describes marriage. In other contexts, δουλωω and related words emphasize that one person submits to, obeys, and seeks the pleasure of another. For example, Paul describes himself as a "slave [a word derived from δουλωω] of Jesus Christ" in Rom. 1:1, and urges believers to "present your members slaves to righteousness unto holiness" (Rom. 6:19). So, in 1 Cor. 7:15, the word teaches that in a healthy marriage each spouse should serve the other's well-being. It emphasizes the daily duties of marriage, not the "marriage bond." When the unbeliever walks out of a mixed marriage, these daily duties end. If an unbelieving wife leaves, her husband does not need to keep her car running. If an unbelieving husband leaves, his wife does not need to consult him on major decisions.

When the unbeliever departs, the believer is no longer enslaved to the spouse. The human duties end. But 1 Cor. 7:15 says nothing about the bond that marriage establishes before God. Verse 39 does discuss that bond, using a different Greek word to describe a unity that it later says ends with death. Because Paul uses different terms in the two verses, we should not assume that they describe the same concept.

12.4 Does Paul Allow Divorce and Remarriage?

Contrary to popular opinion, 1 Corinthians 7 is not a manifesto for bachelors and old maids. It recognizes both celibacy and marriage as gifts of God. It commands believing couples to stay together, and urges people married to unbelievers to do all they can to preserve their marriages.

When we understand the chapter in this way, verse 15 takes on a new light. It does not authorize an easy way for people to get out from under the carnal burden of marriage. It simply recognizes that if an unbeliever seeks a separation, the believer may not be able to do anything about it. When the human union is broken, the believer cannot discharge the duties of marriage, and should not feel guilty about those duties. An abandoned believer is no longer enslaved to the

departed spouse. But such a believer may not remarry, for only death breaks the bond that ties man and wife together before God.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What feature of 1 Corinthians 7 seems strange if we think that Paul is advocating celibacy?
2. To what sort of position on the part of the Corinthians is Paul probably responding?
3. How is Paul's response to the Corinthians like the Lord's teaching to his disciples on the same subject?
4. How are "the rest" in 1 Cor. 7:12 different from "the unmarried and widows" and "the married" of the earlier verses?
5. How does this difference explain Paul's comments, "not I but the Lord" (verse 10) and "I speak, not the Lord" (verse 12)?
6. What is the "peace" to which the Lord has called the believer in verse 15?
7. Please compare and contrast the words "bound" in 1 Cor. 7:39 and "enslaved" ("bondage" or "bound" in some translations) in 1 Cor. 7:15.

NOTES

12.5 Adams' Arguments from 1 Corinthians 7

In addition to 1 Cor. 7:15, Adams (1980) comments extensively on two other passages in the same chapter to support his position that divorce breaks the marriage bond in God's sight.

12.5.1 1 Cor. 7:11: "Remain Unmarried"

In the instructions to believing couples, Paul writes,

To the married I exhort—not I, but the Lord: Let not the wife depart from the husband. But if she should depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to the husband (1 Cor. 7:10,11).

Because Paul calls the woman "unmarried," Adams (1980:40-44) argues that her departure is a full divorce rather than a separation. Paul endows this statement with the full authority of the Lord. So, Adams concludes, God himself recognizes the result of divorce as being "unmarried," and we cannot speak of divorced people as "still married in God's eyes."

So far as civil authority is concerned, the departure probably is divorce, not just a temporary separation. The verb "to depart" is the passive of $\chi\omega\rho\iota\zeta\omega$, and is used in the papyri as a legal term for divorce (BAG *sub voce*). Furthermore, the result is certainly the state of being unmarried so far as secular custom is concerned, for that is both the purpose of divorce and the plain statement of the text. The point at issue is whether or not God recognizes that state.

If both God and the state recognize the couple as unmarried, then Paul's exhortation is confusing, for he enjoins the divorced wife, with an authority he attributes to the Lord, to "remain unmarried." What is the reason for this injunction?

Adams argues that Paul is seeking reconciliation between the partners, and because Deut. 24:1-4 blocks reconciliation after remarriage, remarriage must be prevented. But Paul does not

cite Deuteronomy as the basis for his ruling. He cites the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (as Adams recognizes). In the Gospel passages about divorce, the Lord does not raise the issue of reconciliation. In fact, he does not even say, "Don't remarry." He does say, "If you remarry, you commit adultery."

The Lord Jesus recognizes that divorces happen, and so does Paul. The Lord condemns remarriage to another person as adultery, and Paul, claiming the Lord's authority, also condemns remarriage. Because Paul explicitly cites the Lord, it is clear that he is thinking of adultery, not technical irreconcilability, as the motive for his command, "Remain unmarried." Paul is echoing the Lord's teaching that a divorced person who marries someone else commits adultery.

What, then, does "unmarried" mean? Certainly, civil custom considers a divorced couple unmarried. If God also does, why is it adultery to remarry? Paul forbids remarriage. In support, he explicitly cites the Lord's teaching, where the reason is adultery. Adultery is only a problem if a union still exists before God.

This understanding of the text leads to the conclusion that the Scriptures can call a couple "unmarried" even if that state is only true in a civil sense and not in a spiritual one. The Bible does sometimes describe events according to their outward appearance. For example, Gen. 3:20 states that Eve is "the mother of every living [person]," plainly referring to the mass of mankind that issues from her. Yet all of them are born "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), and many never know spiritual life at all. The only life they know is physical, yet the Bible does not hesitate to call them "living." For another example, the Lord in Matt. 23:9 instructs the disciples, "Do not call [anyone] on earth your father, for you have one Father, who is in heaven." Yet Matt. 4:21 describes James and John as being "in the boat with Zebedee their father," and Matt. 10:37 includes "father" as among those whom believers should love less than they do the Lord. In the most complete sense only God is our Father, yet the Bible sometimes uses the word in a more superficial sense to describe human parents.

Words sometimes have a secular sense and a spiritual sense. When they do, the Bible may use either sense, and only the context can show the meaning in a particular passage. The context in 1 Cor. 7:10,11 indicates that the kind of "unmarried" state in view is one that prohibits remarriage. That is, civil custom recognizes the original marriage as dissolved, but God considers a union still to be in effect between the original partners.

12.5.2 1 Cor. 7:27,28: Bound and Released

Later in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul writes,

Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek release. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned (1 Cor. 7:27,28a).

Adams argues that the two occurrences of "release" in this passage both refer to divorce.

Clearly, when Paul says that one must not *seek* to be released from a wife he doesn't mean by death! The release in view can mean only one thing—release by divorce. So too, the release in the second instance must refer to release from the bonds of marriage by divorce (Adams 1980:84).

He concludes that the permission granted in 7:28a is explicit permission for divorced people to remarry.

It is unthinkable to Adams that one spouse could seek to be released from the other by death. Sadly, many people in tense marital situations find it much easier than Adams does to think of this possibility. Case studies of both murder and suicide all too often report unhappy marriages as contributing to the tragedy. It would be comforting to know that people only seek release by divorce, but the grim reality is otherwise. Even a believer who would never raise a hand against self or spouse might in time of anguish cry out to God for an end to life. Paul himself expresses a desire "to depart, and to be with Christ," a condition that he describes as "far better" than earthly turmoil so far as his personal comfort is concerned (Phil. 1:23), and the imprecatory psalms show clearly how a believer sometimes pleads with God to remove an adversary that he dares not touch himself.

So it is not clear that "the release in view [in 1 Cor. 7:27] can mean only ... release by divorce." It might very well mean release by death, as a believer begs God to remove an intolerable spouse or to be himself removed. In fact, when we take the larger context of the chapter into account, the possibility that Paul is referring to death rather than divorce grows into a strong probability.

Paul organizes 1 Corinthians into sections introduced by one of the two phrases "Now concerning **X**" (7:1,25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1,12) and "Now I **Z** you, brethren" (where **Z** is a verb of speaking: 1:10; 11:2; 15:1; 16:15). The section in which 7:27,28 falls is 7:25-40, marked off clearly by the headings at 7:25 and 8:1. Internally, Paul organizes this section as a *chiasm*, a literary device marked by correspondences between the two ends, then between the sections just after the start and just before the finish, and so on, in an ABC...CBA pattern. This pattern is a common way to organize documents in the ancient world (Parunak 1981, 1982, 1983). When we find such a pattern, it can help us understand a passage by showing us sections of the passage that we should interpret together, though they may be separated by several verses.

Table 9 summarizes the chiasm in 1 Cor. 7:25-40. Each line summarizes one pair of sections, except for the last line, which corresponds to the center. Note how the order of the verses carries us down the list of topics, then back up, showing the inverted symmetry or chiasm. The italics show how he makes his point at three symmetrically located positions in the overall structure.

Table 9: The Chiasm of 1 Cor 7:25-40

1. Paul's "Judgment"	25b	40b
2. Marriage Optional	26-28a	36-40a
3. Paul's Point	28b	35b
4. "This I Say/Speak"	29a	35a
5. Qualifications	29b-31	32b-34
6. Paul's Point	32a	

1. Paul's "Judgment" — Throughout 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is careful to indicate whether he draws his teaching from the earthly words of Christ or from the direct moving of God's Spirit in his mind. This section opens and closes with the note that it is new revelation to Paul.
2. Marriage Optional — The verses we are studying, 7:27-28, indicate that singleness is attractive but not required, a point also made in 7:36-40a.
3. Paul's Point — The main point Paul wants to make appears on both sides of the chiasm at 7:28b,35b, as well as in the center at 7:32a. It is that believers should be without care or distraction in their service to the Lord.
4. "This I say/speak" — The strong verbal similarity between "this I say" (7:29a) and "this I speak" (7:35a) is a formal pointer to help us keep track of the chiasmic order.

5. Qualifications — The sections at 7:28b-31 and 7:32b-34 both show why neither marriage nor singleness can be an absolute good. The first section emphasizes that marital state, like all the other accoutrements of this life, is only a temporary circumstance that will one day come to an end. We are to use it for God's glory, without making it an end in itself. The second section illustrates this ambivalence by showing that both the married and the unmarried are subject to care and distraction, which the believer is to avoid. Care (worry) for the things of the Lord is no better than care for the things of the world. Both are wrong.
6. Paul's Point — At the center, Paul reaffirms his central principle. Christians should be without worry. Whether they marry or not should depend on which state leaves them most free from care, not which state is more "holy."

In this symmetrical structure, verses 27 and 28 correspond to verses 36 through 40a. In 7:27-28, Paul abstractly describes marriage as an option. In 7:36-40a, he gives two concrete illustrations of this option. The first illustration is a first marriage of two young people (7:36-38). The second illustration is the remarriage of a widow after the death of her husband (7:39-40). The second illustration describes a specific "release" from marriage—through death, not divorce.

The chiasmic structure shows that Paul means these two sections (7:27-28, 36-40) to amplify one another. Both sections talk about a "release" from marriage, and the second one identifies this release as resulting from the death of one partner. So a reference to "release" through death is not at all unlikely in 7:27-28. In fact, it is more likely than any other nuance, given the context.

In summary, Adams understands "release" in 1 Cor. 7:27,28 to refer to divorce, since he cannot conceive that Paul would speak of seeking release from a marriage through death. If the release in question is by divorce, then 7:28 explicitly permits remarriage after divorce. We have seen two reasons to believe that divorce is not the primary means of release that Paul has in mind. First, it is not at all unthinkable that someone in an unhappy marriage might seek escape through death, perhaps by agonizing prayer that God would end a union that seems intolerable. Second, the overall structure of the passage links 7:27,28 with 7:39-40, where the only release in view is by death. Since Paul is probably thinking of death in 7:27, 7:28 does not give explicit permission for remarriage after divorce.

We must remember that while seeking escape through death is not unthinkable, it is also not spiritual. Paul exhorts his readers, "Do not seek release." In helping others, we must know that sometimes they may explore this avenue. For ourselves, we should ask God to solve the problem within marriage, not by breaking it.

**PART III:
APPLICATION: PRACTICAL MATTERS**

CHAPTER 13 SOME PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

So far, this book has been **textual**, not **topical**. We have studied the major biblical texts dealing with divorce in the order in which they were probably written. We began with texts, rather than topics, because of Paul's blueprint for Bible study:

*Every Scripture
is given by inspiration of God, and
is profitable
for doctrine,
for reproof,
for correction,
for discipline in righteousness,
that the man of God might be
— complete,
— thoroughly equipped for
every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17).*

Doctrine takes priority over the more practical concerns of reproof, correction, and discipline.

We begin with doctrine, but we do not stop there. The Bible goes beyond the head to touch the heart and change the life. Beginning in this chapter, we will concentrate on reproof (pointing out practical errors) and correction (suggesting ways to fix these problems).

Paul also requires discipline in righteousness. This step goes beyond what a book can provide. Such discipline is best done in local churches, with the caring help of committed believers and the firm guidance of godly elders.

In this chapter, we will summarize the practical lessons of the texts we have examined. Then, in the final chapters of our study, we will discuss questions that do not grow directly out of the main texts on divorce.

There is not space here to treat every question about divorce and remarriage. The only book that can answer every need of the human heart is the Bible. Any lesser work can at best be selective, concentrating on some areas of need but leaving many other questions untouched. When the Bible answers some of our questions through a study like this one, we will be encouraged to go to the Bible for the answers to the others as well. If these chapters do not discuss your particular question, please consider it an "exercise for the student," and take it directly to the Scriptures.

The answers to some practical questions are implicit in the passages we have already studied. In this chapter, we review what we have learned about five such questions:

- Is divorce ever justified?
- May divorced people remarry?
- May a divorced couple be reconciled?
- Are marriages between believers and unbelievers binding?
- Can marriage problems be "under the blood"?

The next three chapters consider additional questions that are not directly addressed in the “divorce” passages, but for which other Scriptures give guidance.

13.1 Is Divorce Ever Justified?

Marriage unites two people more intimately than does any other human relationship. Everything that one partner does affects the other. They can clearly see one another's faults, and are often hurt when those faults frustrate their own desires. Marriage confronts us with our own selfishness and immaturity. It gives the most practical evidence one could want that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and incurable" (Jer. 17:9).

Marriage problems differ in their complexity, and couples differ in their maturity and ability to work out disagreements. Most families can handle most of the problems that arise, either by themselves or with the help of friends and counselors, but sometimes a couple encounters a problem that exhausts these resources. It is then that the question arises, "Is it time for a divorce?"

For believers, the answer to that question is always, "No." We have examined every passage in the Bible that is commonly cited to excuse divorce. None supports that conclusion.

- Moses never legislates divorce, but only tells people what to do once it happens (as we saw in Chapter 5).
- God's separation from Israel (see Chapter 7) does not release the partners from the marriage, but is a prelude leading either to execution or to reconciliation.
- Ezra's massive separation of families (considered in Chapter 8) gives no precedent for divorce, because the relation in view is not full marriage.
- The "exception clause" in the Lord's teaching in Matthew (dealt with in Chapters 9-11) refers to ending a marriage, not by divorce, but by capital punishment.
- The "Pauline Privilege" of separation from an unbelieving spouse (studied in Chapter 12) does not release the believer from the marriage, but only from certain of its obligations, and in any case is never initiated by the believer.

Some have suggested that certain extreme circumstances, such as physical abuse in a family, may permit a believer to seek a divorce. Chapter 16 will examine this specific situation. For now, it is enough to note that the Bible never explicitly authorizes a believer to seek a divorce.

What, then, are people to do with their problems? What happens when a couple cannot agree, when their family cannot help, when the counsel of friends is ineffective? What happens when every resource is exhausted? The Bible exhorts them to look again. There is one resource that is never exhausted — God, with whom "nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37). Many believers run away from miracles. They say that God can do the impossible, but try very hard to save him the trouble by taking matters into their own hands.

Certainly, we are not to set up impossible situations to tempt God into a miracle. The Lord establishes this principle when he refuses to summon an angelic parachute by jumping off the temple pinnacle. But when impossible situations do arise, we should not try to bend the word of God to create an escape. Instead, we should turn to God in confession and repentance, and expect him to intervene.

God can save an unbelieving spouse. He can change a mate's bad habits (or our own, if that is where the problem lies). In truly impossible cases, he can end a marriage instantly, by taking one partner away. Every believer will agree that God can do these things. If he chooses not to, we are hardly justified in taking matters into our own hands and putting asunder those whom God has joined together.

13.2 May Divorced People Remarry?

The Bible never authorizes divorce. Yet divorce happens, through the initiative of unbelievers or of misguided believers. Afterwards, the partners sometimes wish to marry others. May they?

In Chapter 10, we saw that the Lord Jesus forbids remarriage after divorce. The statements preserved in Mark and Luke are unambiguous. In Matthew, the Lord qualifies his teaching. On the basis of this qualification, some believers allow remarriage in cases of infidelity.

Our study of the Law of Moses in Chapter 4 illuminates the Lord's words in Matthew. Fornication does allow remarriage without adultery, but only because execution of the guilty partner breaks the marriage bond and leaves the other free to remarry, as we saw in Chapter 9

In 1 Cor. 7:15, Paul writes,

But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart. The brother or sister is not enslaved in such cases.

Many people have suggested that such desertion leaves the believing partner free to remarry. Our study of this text and its context (in Chapter 12) shows that this conclusion is unfounded. Paul does recognize that the believer is free from certain obligations that marriage usually brings. However, he carefully avoids vocabulary that he elsewhere uses to describe the end of a marriage. The couple is still one in God's eyes, and remarriage would be adultery.

In sum, there is no biblical justification for a divorced person to remarry while the original partner remains alive.

13.3 May a Divorced Couple be Reconciled?

After a divorce, the partners may repent and desire to restore their home. Their task will not be an easy one, for the problems that drove them apart will probably surface as soon as they are together again. Still, if they have not married others during their separation, they should be encouraged to reunite. Before God, they are man and wife, and they fail in their responsibilities not only to one another but also to him by remaining apart.

They may not simply begin living together, for as Christians they are to be subject to the civil authorities (Romans 13), in whose eyes they are no longer married. They should be legally remarried, and then get on with the business of building a Christian home.

The situation is different when one partner or the other has married someone else since the divorce. The most direct biblical teaching on the matter is Deuteronomy 24, which forbids any reunion of the original couple. In this case, they should look to the Lord for grace to remain celibate as long as they both live.

13.4 Are Marriages between Believers and Unbelievers Binding?

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament prohibit marriages between believers and unbelievers. Ezra 9 and 10 show that such unions could be dissolved in the Old Testament, but Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 7 indicates that, under the new covenant, believers should not leave their unbelieving spouses.

We learned the reason for this difference in Chapter 8

A legitimate marriage requires civil recognition. In Israel, civil and sacred law are one and the same. That law forbids mixed marriages, so they are not binding. Today, God has separated civil government (the state) from spiritual government (the church). The church prohibits mixed marriages, and should discipline its members if they enter them, but the marriages themselves are binding if the state allows them.

13.5 Can Marriage Problems be “Under the Blood”?

In discussions of divorce, one commonly hears the question, "Did the divorce [adultery, remarriage, fornication, etc.] happen before or after he was saved?" Some people feel that such sins, if they happen before salvation, are "under the blood" and do not affect later decisions. For example, it is often suggested that a divorced woman who is later saved may remarry. Or a church may exclude divorced and remarried people from positions of church leadership and prominent service, but make exceptions for people who were saved after they sinned.

Such arguments confuse the **guilt** of sin with its **consequences**. Sin has two effects--one that affects our relationship with God, and one that affects us privately and in relation to other people. Salvation removes the first effect immediately, but not the second.

For example, drunkenness is a sin. It excludes a person from the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). It also destroys the body, by poisoning the liver and other organs. Any drunkard who wishes to come to God may be saved by repenting, forsaking his sin, and receiving Jesus Christ. The guilt, the relationship of enmity between the person and God, is gone immediately. But the physical damage of sin may persist until the "redemption of the body" at the return of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:23).

The consequences of sin may include liver disease for an alcoholic, hallucinations for a drug abuser, venereal disease for a licentious person, or an inescapable bond of marriage for a divorced person. Paul is speaking of these consequences of sin when he writes,

Be not deceived. God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows, that shall he also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption (Gal. 6:7,8).

God does not promise deliverance from these consequences during the present age.

Consider the implications if remarriage were permitted for divorces that take place before salvation but not for those that take place afterward. We would have to conclude that salvation not only forgives the sin, but also dissolves a previously existing marriage bond. Then we would have to conclude that every couple who is married before salvation should remarry after, and there is no evidence in the Bible that early Christians did anything at all like this. Many things change when one becomes a believer. Marital status — married, single, widowed, divorced — is not one of them.

Marital sin incurs guilt toward God, guilt that is completely removed when a person turns in repentance and faith to the Lord Jesus. Marital sin also has very practical consequences for our relationships with other people. The Bible nowhere teaches that those consequences disappear automatically when someone is saved.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Mark a sheet of paper into rows and columns. Label the rows with the references of the passages that we studied in the earlier chapters. Label the columns with practical questions about divorce and remarriage. You might include the questions we discuss in this chapter, questions from some of the later chapters, or questions of your own that this book does not cover. Then try to fill in each block on the page with the contribution that the passage in that row makes to answering the question in that column. Can you think of other passages, not discussed in this book, that help answer some of your questions?

CHAPTER 14 SHOULD SECOND MARRIAGES BE DISSOLVED?

It is adultery for a divorced person to marry someone else while the previous spouse is still living. Some people may learn this teaching after already being divorced and remarried. What does God expect of them now? Certainly, they should confess their sin and repent of it. They will be careful never to repeat it. They may wonder, though, whether they are not continually repeating it by remaining in the second marriage. After all, if the first union still stands before God, perhaps the second one can never be more than an adulterous affair in his eyes. Should they seek to dissolve the second family to avoid living in sin?

Many devout believers do counsel divorced and remarried people to end their second unions. They base this advice on the reasoning we have just outlined, and sometimes buttress it with arguments from the Lord's earthly teaching and Rom. 7:3. We will examine

- the argument based on the Gospels
- and that from Romans 7,
- then ask how the advice to leave second spouses fits in with the rest of the Bible,
- and finally discuss a fictitious case history to illustrate the practical consequences of the two views.

14.1 What do the Gospels Say about the Second Marriage?

In all four Gospel texts on divorce, the Lord uses a verb in the present tense to describe the adultery of remarriage. Greek literature often uses this tense to emphasize continuous action. If the present tense in these verses served this function, the verses would teach that the adultery of a remarriage is a continuing state, not just a single action, and the second marriage would have to end.

The Greek present tense does not always indicate continuous action. Sometimes it indicates that the action is what one would usually expect in the circumstances. This usage is common in statements of general truths, such as proverbs or legal pronouncements.

For example, Heb. 3:4 uses the present tense: "Every house is built by someone." The writer does not mean that somebody is continually active in constructing every house, as though the building process were never completed. The present tense here means that, as a general truth, if you see a house, you can assume that someone built it.

The general present also appears in 1 Cor. 15:42-44.

So also is the resurrection of the dead.

It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption.

It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory.

It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.

It is sown a soulish body; it is raised a spiritual body.

The present tense in the verbs "sown" and "raised" does not indicate that being sown (or buried) and raised are continual actions. Actually, Paul is describing them as single, well-defined events.

He uses the present tense to emphasize that it is a general, timeless truth that burial reflects corruption, dishonor, and weakness, while resurrection shows incorruption, glory, and power.

In the notes, we give technical reasons for understanding the present tense of the verbs in the Lord's teaching about divorce as general rather than continual. The tense does not emphasize that a second marriage is continual adultery, but identifies the teaching as a general statement about divorce, remarriage, and adultery, a statement that is true regardless of the details of how the divorce or remarriage takes place. Thus these passages do not prove that the adultery of remarriage is continual.

14.2 What does Rom. 7:3 Say about the Second Marriage?

To some readers, Rom. 7:1-3 suggests that it is adultery to continue in a second marriage after divorce. Translations such as the AV, the NEB, and the RSV especially encourage this view. For example, the AV renders the passage,

Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress.

The English phrase "be married to another man" is ambiguous. It might mean either "enter into another marriage" or "be in another marriage." If it means, "be in another marriage," then continuing in a second marriage after divorce would be adultery, and second marriages should be dissolved to avoid this continuing adultery. If it means, "enter into another marriage," then the sin consists in the act of remarrying, not the state of being remarried, and there are no grounds for dissolving the second marriage.

Paul gives us an important clue to interpreting this paragraph when he tells us that he is writing to those who know the Law. He is not presenting new teaching, but merely emphasizing what the Law of Moses already requires. He chooses his language to bring to mind the Old Testament laws that govern adultery.

One example of this emphasis on Old Testament language is the phrase that describes the woman in Rom. 7:2, "which hath a husband." This phrase translates the Greek word *hupandros*, literally "under a husband," which is used in the Greek translation of the canonical Old Testament books only at Num. 5:20. There it describes a woman who is accused of adultery. Because she is "under a husband," she is guilty if she consorts with someone else. By using this rare word in Rom. 7:2, Paul calls to mind the law of the adultery trial in Numbers 5.

The phrase "be married to another man" is another citation from the OT. It is a precise quotation from the Septuagint of Deut. 24:2, which describes what a woman divorced from a man is very likely to do. She is likely to remarry, to enter into another union. We saw in Chapter 5 that Moses does not excuse her action, but considers her "defiled" as a result of it, and expects the original husband to prosecute her for infidelity. In Deut. 24:2 the phrase emphasizes entering the second union, and we should take it the same way in Rom. 7:3.

The Greek verb "to be" that the Septuagint and Paul use in this expression strengthens this conclusion. Greek has two verbs that the Bible commonly renders "to be." One describes abstract existence. The other, the one, used here, is closer to the English verb "to become," and

emphasizes a change from one state to another. If Paul meant to teach that the state of remarriage (as opposed to its initiation) is adultery, we would expect him to use the other verb. The verb he does use, as well as the source of the entire phrase in the Pentateuch, confirms that Paul is condemning the act of entering the second marriage, rather than describing the state of being in that marriage.

14.3 What Principles can we Glean from Other Scriptures?

Our study of the divorce saying in the Gospels and in Romans 7 shows that it is sinful for divorced people to enter into a second marriage. Is it also sinful for them to continue in such a relation? When people in this circumstance repent, should they end their union?

We have seen that the verses usually cited to urge such separation do not carry the weight placed upon them. Other scriptural evidence suggests that separation is not the answer in such a situation. We will consider the general biblical attitude toward the marriage covenant, the biblical treatment of polygamy, and Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 7.

14.3.1 Marriage in the Bible

We have seen over and over how highly God values the marriage union. If a second union after divorce is a marriage, it shares this high position. We naturally expect that if God wants such unions dissolved, he will say so explicitly. But the Scriptures never command that second marriages be dissolved. So we should be cautious about demanding their separation.

The crucial link in this argument is the statement, "IF a second union after divorce is a marriage." Those who urge separation believe that it is not a marriage, but adultery. We have seen that the Gospel passages and Romans 7 do not support this conclusion. In fact, the Lord's words in the Gospels explicitly describe the union as a marriage. They use the Greek word for "marry" to describe the second unions of both the husband and wife from the first marriage.

The verb "to marry" in these verses might refer only to the human custom, without implying that God recognizes the union. In the notes to Chapter 12 we saw that another marriage term, the adjective "unmarried," can mean "unmarried so far as people are concerned," and apply to people whom God still considers joined together. There is a difference, though, between being secularly married and secularly divorced. We saw in Chapter 3 that God joins people together when there is physical union in the context of a commitment to live together as man and wife and in keeping with the requirements of civil government. Thus, those who enter a secular marriage are joined before God as well. God never sanctions separation, so a divorce can only be secular. There is such a thing as purely secular separation, but we have no reason to think that there is such a thing as purely secular marriage.

Two points are clear.

1. The Scriptures call second unions marriages.
2. The Scriptures never demand, or even authorize, separation of a marriage while the partners live.

If we require termination of second unions, we go beyond the teaching of the Bible, and possibly contradict it.

14.3.2 The Place of Polygamy

A first marriage is (of course) marriage. Though people may seek to end it by divorce, God does not recognize their action. A second marriage is also marriage, according to the Gospels. It is natural to conclude that people who are divorced and remarried are really married to two people.

In 1 Tim. 3:2,12; 5:9 Paul speaks of men who are "husbands of one wife" and women who are "wives of one husband." These expressions recognize the possibility that a person could be married to more than one person at a time, at least from God's perspective. As we will discuss in Chapter 16 the reference is probably to multiple mates through divorce and remarriage.

Remarriage places one person in two marriage bonds, and thus can be viewed as a kind of polygamy (or polyandry, if a divorced woman remarries). The Old Testament has much to say about polygamy.

- The Old Testament recognizes polygamous unions. As we saw in Chapter 8 even unions with concubines are not to be dissolved casually, and the patriarchs' multiple wives clearly represent unions superior to concubinage.
- The Old Testament never commands polygamy.
- In fact, the Old Testament disapproves of polygamy. The marriage God ordains for Adam and Eve is not polygamous. The humor in the story of Jacob and his two wives (Genesis 30) shows the writer's scorn of such arrangements. Moses warns against polygamous kings (Deut. 17:17), and the historian expressly traces the downfall of Solomon's kingdom to his many wives (1 Kings 11).
- Yet the Old Testament never commands that polygamous unions be dissolved. Apparently, once they begin, they impose responsibilities on their members just as any other marriage would.

Monogamy is not an invention of Christianity, or an original idea in the New Testament. It is the teaching of the entire Bible. Similarly, both Testaments tolerate polygamy. The New Testament never commands that polygamous unions be dissolved (whether they result from explicit polygamy, or from divorce and remarriage).

14.3.3 The Evidence of 1 Corinthians 7

The problem of divorce and remarriage is not new. Moses gives legislation to control it in Deuteronomy 24, showing that some Israelites of his time are divorced and remarried. The issue does not disappear in the New Testament, for the Lord addresses it in his teaching in the Gospels. We can imagine that the problem is especially acute in the Gentile churches of Greece and Asia Minor, where the Bible's high view of marriage is in tension with the immorality of pagan culture.

When we consider how widespread the problem is, we turn naturally to 1 Corinthians 7. The Corinthian believers view celibacy as intrinsically good, and propose dissolving their existing marriages. Paul tells them that they must not divorce, or even forego normal marital relations. The only exception he allows is separation from bed and board if an unbelieving spouse leaves. If being involved in a second marriage is grounds for divorce, we would expect him to say so.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul does not urge separation from a second marriage. His silence is significant, since he is writing about separation to people whose culture readily allows divorce

and remarriage. Some Corinthian believers may well be married to divorced people. Even if they are not, this case is likely to arise in the loose morality of Corinth, and we expect Paul to anticipate it and deal with it. In fact, Paul does not make this case an exception from his general rule that the believer, whether married to an unbeliever or to another believer, must not seek divorce.

1 Corinthians 7, more than any other chapter in the Bible, seems tailor-made for instruction about ending second marriages. Even here, Paul reinforces the biblical strictures against marital separation. Neither he nor any other biblical writer commands divorce in these cases. We should certainly hesitate to go beyond their example.

14.4 A Fictitious Case History

One strong motive for ending second marriages is an interest in promoting godly conduct. To understand and evaluate this motive, we consider a hypothetical example.

14.4.1 An Argument for Ending Second Marriages

Assume that Jim divorces Jane, and she later falls in love with Bob. Jane professes faith in Christ, and understands that it would be adultery for her to marry Bob while Jim is still alive.

The two positions under discussion in this chapter might have very different effects on Jane.

Suppose she believes that the adultery of the second marriage consists in entering that marriage, and that once the marriage is established, it is valid in God's eyes. She might reason, "I'll go ahead, sin once, and marry Bob. Once we're together, no one can separate us. Then I will confess my sin, God will forgive me, and I'll have Bob."

If, on the other hand, she believes that continuing in the second marriage is adultery, she can never salve her conscience with the thought, "I'll just sin this once." She can never be right with God until she leaves the adulterous relationship.

It seems that teaching that second marriages should be dissolved might help keep people like Jane out of sin.

14.4.2 Paul's View of a Similar Argument

The argument is plausible, but it has a questionable pedigree. Paul meets the same objection to his teaching of salvation by grace apart from works in the early chapters of Romans. "If you teach people that God's grace saves them in spite of their sin," his opponents insist, "people will just keep on sinning." Paul summarizes their argument in these words: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:2). In other words, his teaching is suspect because it makes it too easy for people to sin.

Paul does not want people to continue in sin, but he does not change his teaching, either. His response occupies the next three chapters of Romans. In them he insists that anyone who would take advantage of God's grace to continue in sin, shows by his sin that he has not really received God's grace. "How shall we, who died to sin, live any longer in it?" (Rom. 6:2).

Paul's response applies to Jane as well. Jane may profess salvation, but if she presumes upon the grace of God and decides to sin "just this once" to get Bob, she shows a sad lack of understanding of the basic gospel. She may plan later to turn back to God, but there is no

assurance that he will receive her. Her scheming will probably lead to feigned repentance that cannot win his forgiveness, not to godly sorrow and contrition. Her wilful sin suggests that she is not truly saved to begin with. How, then, can she expect God's mercy if she deliberately transgresses his law? The church should deal with her, not by adjusting its doctrine on pragmatic grounds, but by solemnly warning her of the implications of her attitude, and by disciplining her if she persists in her plan.

14.4.3 Unexpected Consequences

It's important to warn Jane that even if God does forgive her "single sin," its consequences may persist for years. "God is not mocked. Whatever a person sows, that shall he also reap" (Gal. 6:7). She may be unable to escape the nagging of a guilty conscience. If Bob is willing to cooperate with her rebellion, he certainly is not fit to lead her spiritually, and she cannot expect a Christian home. Her children will probably find her sinful example more forceful than her righteous protestations, and she will live to mourn their rebellion. She may expect smooth sailing once past "the single sin," but God's harvest law warns of repercussions at least as awful as the notion of continued adultery advanced by those who would urge a second divorce.

In fact, the practical consequences of remarriage are in some ways even graver if we consider the second marriage valid than if we demand its termination. As a valid marriage, it can be ended in God's eyes only by death. With the sinful foundation she is laying for it, she can expect only unhappiness and strife in it. Yet there will be no escape from it that does not sink her even deeper in sin. The day will come when she will wish with all her heart that she were free of it, and she will rue her rashness in seeking to press beyond "one little sin" to the satanic promise of remarried bliss.

14.4.4 How to Motivate Godliness

The church must exhort its members to godliness, but not by inventing unscriptural doctrines. It should teach God's absolute holiness and hatred of sin, the folly of trying to "slip one over" on him, and the certain danger of reaping what we sow even if God does forgive us. It should warn that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:20,26), and that wilful, deliberate sin speaks louder than the most pious profession of belief. It should be ready to back up its teaching with discipline. Then it will see increase in godliness, not only in marital purity, but in every area of practical piety.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of action might the present tense of the verb "commit adultery" represent in the Gospel texts, and what implications would each kind of action have for the question of second marriages?
2. Which kind of action do you think the verb represents, and why?
3. What phrase in Rom. 7:3 might mean that second marriages should be dissolved?
4. What evidence is there that it does not mean this?
5. Given the general teaching of the Bible about marriage, what would you conclude about second marriages?

6. Please compare the teaching of the Old Testament with the teaching of the New Testament on monogamy and polygamy.
7. What does 1 Corinthians 7 contribute to the question of dissolving second marriages?
8. Is one position on this question more likely to promote godliness than the other? Please discuss.

NOTES

14.5 The Present Tense: General or Continuous?

Both the syntax of the verses and their broader context suggest that we should interpret the present tense of "commit" in the Gospel divorce sayings as general rather than continuous.

Syntactically, the verses in Matthew and Mark are conditional relative clauses. Luke uses an alternate construction with much the same sense. The use of the present tense in the "then" part of such clauses fits a pattern called "the present general supposition," which indicates that the writer is setting down a general principle without having a specific example or instance in mind (Burton 1898:123). That is, in conditional relative clauses, the present tense is commonly used to present general action.

The context of each of the Gospel sayings also supports their interpretation as present general suppositions. In none of them is the Lord discussing a particular instance of divorce or remarriage. Rather, he is laying down a general principle applicable to anyone who divorces. In such a case, we expect him to use the present tense with general meaning, to emphasize the generality of his instruction.

CHAPTER 15 THE DIVORCED PERSON IN THE CHURCH

In some churches, divorced people are outcasts, barred from any ministry and shunned by those who know their background. In others, divorce is considered a private matter, and the church takes no note of it at all. In this chapter, we consider the implications of divorce for a believer's fellowship and ministry in the local church.

- Divorce has implications for a person's role in the church, but so does the forgiveness that is in Christ Jesus.
- Divorce and remarriage do disqualify a person for certain ministries.
- They are not the only disqualification, and should not eclipse other requirements for these positions.
- Furthermore, divorced people, like other saved sinners, have spiritual gifts that they should exercise for the benefit of the whole church.

15.1 Divorce and Forgiveness

When people divorce or remarry in violation of God's law, the church should reprove them. If they truly repent of their sin, there is no more need for reproof. They should not mourn over the sin that is past, but rejoice in God's forgiveness. The church, in turn, should share their joy and restore them to fellowship.

The Corinthian epistles illustrate both the need to reprove the sinner and the need to restore the penitent.

15.1.1 Sin in Corinth

1 Corinthians 5 tells of a man who married his father's wife, in violation of both Levitical and pagan standards. The Corinthians overlook his conduct, and are proud of their tolerance, but Paul views the matter differently.

You are puffed up, and have not mourned instead, that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst (5:2).

They should not give the offender their fellowship as long as he continues in his sin.

[Do] not associate together, if anyone who is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or an alcoholic, or a thief. With such a person [do] not eat. . . . Remove the wicked one from among you (5:11,13).

His brazen rebelliousness strongly suggests that he is not a believer, so he has no place in the fellowship of God's people. "Remove" means to put him out of the church. "Do not eat" emphasizes the most visible consequence of being put out of the church, exclusion from the Lord's Supper.

The church needs to act just as decisively today when its members sin. Divorce and remarriage deserve stern treatment, as do other flagrant violations of God's law.

15.1.2 Restoration in Corinth

Church discipline involves not only judgment as in 1 Corinthians 5, but also restoration, illustrated in 2 Corinthians 2. (The notes explore the possibility that both chapters describe the same case.) In response to a letter from Paul (2:4), the Corinthians have put out a member from their assembly. Paul describes the discipline as "this punishment, which is by the majority" (2:6). The elders decide the case, but the entire assembly excludes the sinner from its fellowship.

Now Paul is satisfied that the discipline is "sufficient" (2:6). The man has repented, and is in danger of being "overwhelmed with excessive sorrow" (2:7). It is time for healing, and Paul outlines three steps the church should take in restoration: "pardon" the penitent, "comfort" him, and "affirm [their] love toward him" (2:7,8).

When a person under discipline for sin gives sufficient evidence of true repentance, the church must first **pardon**. When the Lord has forgiven the sin, the church can have no further charges.

A formal pardon is not enough. True repentance places a person under deep sorrow. The church should recognize this stress, and comfort the brother or sister just as they would anyone who has been severely bereaved.

Finally, the church needs to affirm its **love** toward the grieved believer. Other believers should go out of their way to reassure the penitent, "You are one of us. What is past, is past. The Lord has forgiven you, and so have we, and we love you because he does." Then they should integrate the person into the life of the church.

15.1.3 The Lessons of Corinth Today

The experience of Corinth offers two lessons for today.

1.1 Corinthians 5 shows that the church should take firm and biblical action against open sin.

2.2 Corinthians 2 shows that when the sinner repents, the church should be eager for restoration.

The first lesson shows that a church should discipline a member who actively seeks a divorce or who remarries after divorce. The broad and consistent teaching on the subject that we have traced throughout the Bible clearly condemns such conduct, and the local assembly should use its authority to enforce this teaching.

When a sinner repents, we also need the second lesson. The church must offer, not an on-going stigma, but pardon, comfort, and love, to those whom the Lord has forgiven.

With regard to repentance and forgiveness, the Bible does not distinguish marital sins from any others. People should repent of them. When people truly repent, they are forgiven.

15.2 What a Divorced Person May Not Do in the Church

We have already distinguished the *guilt* of sin, which affects our relation with God, from its *consequences*, which affect our relations with other people. God's forgiveness removes guilt, but consequences in this life may remain. In particular, a person forgiven of marital sin is still excluded from three positions of prominence in the local church: elders, deacons, and widows. In this section we describe these positions and examine the requirements that the New Testament places on them.

15.2.1 The Restricted Positions

The elders (otherwise called "bishops," "overseers," or "pastors") are the leaders of churches in the New Testament. They correspond approximately to the "pastor" in most modern churches, with three important differences.

1. They are unsalaried, not professionally trained and supported.
2. They work as teams rather than as individuals.
3. They, not the congregation, are the highest human authority in the church.

The New Testament does not mention deacons in most of the churches, and we know little about their specific activities. The churches where they do appear (Philippi, Ephesus, and probably Jerusalem) include a good number of needy folk, so their main responsibility is probably practical ministry of various sorts, though some of them are capable teachers as well.

Only 1 Timothy 5 describes an official group of widows in the church. They seem to be supported by the church, and may be occupied in various ministries of mercy, hospitality, visitation, and counseling.

All three positions enjoy public recognition in the church. We know from 1 Tim. 5:22 that Elders are set apart by the symbol of laying on of hands. The same symbol may have been used for deacons (Acts 6:6), who in any event assume their official responsibilities only after careful probation (1 Tim. 3:10), and the widows are "enrolled" (1 Tim. 5:9) for support. As a result of this recognition, these individuals represent the church in a way that others do not. Since both believers and unbelievers will scrutinize them unusually closely, they must meet unusually high standards of character.

15.2.2 The Requirements

Because elders, deacons, and widows are so visible, Paul in 1 Timothy 3 and 5 lays down stringent requirements for their character and conduct. His instructions are not mere recommendations or ideals: "The overseer **must** be blameless, ..." None of the requirements explicitly mentions divorce or remarriage, but two of them require character traits that a divorced person lacks, and a third cannot be satisfied by a divorced person who has remarried. The three requirements are that one who represents the church officially "be blameless," "rule his own house well," and "be a one-woman man."

To be blameless (1 Tim. 3:2,10; cf. 5:10) is more than having one's sins forgiven. Paul wants church officers to be so exemplary that even unbelievers speak well of them (1 Tim. 3:7). Visible moral failings on the part of prominent members must not be allowed to mar the assembly's reputation. Divorce is highly visible, and many people consider it a character blemish. Blamelessness is even less characteristic of a divorced person who commits adultery through remarriage.

Elders and deacons must not only be blameless, but also have successful experience in leading a home (1 Tim. 3:4-5, 12). The interpersonal skills needed to guide a church successfully are the same as those required to lead a home. Where modern churches require seminary as preparation for pastoring, the New Testament requires experience in leading a home in harmony and godliness. Divorce is the ultimate breakdown in home life, and such a background is a strong warning that a man lacks the personal equipment for church leadership.

The third requirement relevant to divorce and remarriage is that elders (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6) and deacons (1 Tim. 3:12) be "one-woman men," while widows (1 Tim. 5:9) are to be "one-man women." These phrases do not refer to any specific marital situation, but require that a person be free from any taint of infidelity to a single spouse. Remarriage after divorce is adultery, and so (along with many other conditions) violates these requirements. Furthermore, the death of one spouse does not turn a two-spouse person into a one-spouse person, for a widow can fail to be a "one-man woman" (1 Tim. 5:9) even though as a widow she currently has no spouses!

15.3 Other Restrictions on Elders, Deacons, and Widows

In general, divorce disqualifies a person for prominent church service, and remarriage only compounds the problem. The emphasis commonly given to marital issues sometimes eclipses other requirements for church leadership. The disqualification that results from divorce and remarriage does not reflect the indelibility of the sin, but the solemnity of the positions. Many other sins, and even characteristics that are not sins, also disqualify people from these roles. A careful church monitors many issues in the lives of its leaders, and does not overlook other shortcomings by focusing only on marital problems.

For instance, divorce is not the only way a man can fail to rule his house well. Rebellious children give as much evidence for failure to rule well as does divorce. In fact, the elder must have his "children in submission with all graveness" (1 Tim. 3:4). They must be "believing children, not accused of debauchery or unsubmitive" (Tit. 1:6). Yet some churches that would never dream of having a divorced man as pastor excuse his children's conduct with sympathetic comments about "preachers' kids."

In fact, the requirement that a man rule his house well requires that he have a family, but many churches that exclude divorced men from leadership allow single men to hold the same positions.

Blamelessness also requires more than freedom from divorce. Many circumstances may so tarnish a man's reputation that he cannot effectively represent a church in a recognized position of prominence. We will not know that a man is blameless simply by asking whether or not he is divorced. We need a much more thorough knowledge of his life and character.

Other requirements for elders include vigilance and hospitality (1 Tim. 3:2). A lazy or careless man, or one who is greedy, has no place over God's flock. We hardly think of carelessness in the same category as divorce, but both disqualify a man from serving as an elder.

There are many other requirements for prominent ministry besides monogamy. We should view divorce, not as the one great unpardonable sin, but as one among many elements that exclude a person from certain positions in the church.

15.4 What a Divorced Person May Do in the Church

The requirements for church leadership are so stringent that many believers besides those divorced do not meet them. Yet all believers should have some ministry in the church. The Bible teaches that every Christian has a special ability or gift, given by the Holy Spirit for use in the body of Christ.

*To every one is given the manifestation of the Spirit, for the advantage [of all] (1 Cor. 12:7).
As every one has received a gift, minister[] it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of
God (1 Pet. 4:10).*

Those who cannot represent the church in publicly recognized capacities should still "minister [their gifts] to one another" in less formal ways.

The ministries that God exercises through his people include prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, and showing mercy (Rom. 12:6-8). Others in the church besides elders, deacons, and widows should exercise such gifts. A divorced person can exercise the gift of giving. The experience of marital disaster may uniquely qualify a person for exhortation and showing mercy to those currently facing family tensions. Personal Bible studies and group discussions offer opportunities for informal teaching to believers who might not qualify for prominent public ministry. The requirements for elders and deacons are just that—no less, and no more. We should not make them less than requirements, and place those who do not meet the conditions over the flock. Nor should we extend them beyond elders and deacons, and discourage those with such a background from any contribution to the body of Christ. The real issue in the question of the qualifications for public ministry is the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ—over his church, and in the lives of his people.

Christ is sovereign in the church. He is the one who should select church leaders. The lists in 1 Timothy and Titus express the qualifications he requires for leaders. If we remove some qualifications or add others, we usurp his place as the head of the body.

Christ is also sovereign in our individual lives. All of us, left to our own devices, are fully capable of violating every requirement for church service (and even fellowship). Those who meet these requirements do so only because God graciously guards them from temptation and guides their steps. The Lord both sets the requirements and enables some people to meet them. The agreement between the requirements and personal characteristics is our way of identifying those whom the Lord has chosen to represent his church. A person who does not meet the requirements should take that circumstance, not as cause for discouragement, but as the Lord's direction into other areas of influence.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What two steps in handling a sinning church member does Paul teach to the church of Corinth?
2. What three things is the church to do toward someone who has repented of serious sin?
3. Why can sin restrict a person's ministry even after the sin has been forsaken and forgiven?
4. What three positions in the church have marital qualifications?
5. What common feature do these positions share that places such high demands on the character of those who hold them?
6. What three requirements in Timothy and Titus exclude divorced and remarried people from recognized positions of prominent ministry?
7. What evidence is there that a divorced and remarried person fails to meet the "one-spouse person" qualification even after the death of the extra spouse?

8. Please list three requirements other than marital success for elders.
9. Please give three examples of ministries that a divorced person could exercise in the church.

NOTES

15.5 The Penitent in 2 Corinthians 2

In discussing repentance and forgiveness, I suggest that the penitent described in 2 Cor. 2 might be the same as the sinner castigated in 1 Cor. 5. This view was favored by many commentators of the last century. Some recent commentators think that the two are not the same, and that the person in 2 Cor. 2 was guilty, not of sexual sin, but of challenging Paul's authority.

The point made in the chapter does not depend on whether the two incidents concern the same person or not. They indicate general principles of discipline and restoration that apply to any sin. Still, 2 Cor. 2 is more directly applicable to our interests if the older view is correct, and it deserves a hearing even though the tide of scholarly opinion is currently against it.

The question turns on the identification of two events that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians, a painful visit that he earlier paid the Corinthians and a harsh letter that he wrote them in connection with that visit.

- Acts records only two visits of Paul to Corinth, one in Acts 18 when he plants the church there, and the other in Acts 20 on his way back to Jerusalem and arrest. He twice anticipates the Acts 20 visit in 2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1, but calls it his *third* visit, indicating that there must be another visit, unmentioned by Acts, between Acts 18 and Acts 20. In 2 Cor. 2:1, Paul indicates that he previously visited them on an errand of sorrow. This description hardly applies to the initial evangelization of the city in Acts 18, and so must describe the intermediate mystery visit.
- In describing the painful visit, Paul mentions a letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 2:3). This letter concerned the disobedient man (2 Cor. 2:9), and apparently exhorted them to the discipline that led to his repentance. He mentions the letter again in 2 Cor. 7:8,12, emphasizing the sorrow that it brought to them.

The older view identifies the letter mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:3; 7:8,12 with 1 Corinthians. The offender is the man described in 1 Cor. 5. On this view, the painful visit must occur between Paul's first departure from Corinth in Acts 18:18 and the writing of 1 Corinthians, which was probably sent from Ephesus by the hand of Timothy in Acts 19:22 (cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10). The early part of Acts 19 covers two years (Acts 19:10), which is certainly long enough for Paul to visit the Greek churches, especially if he has learned of some problem requiring his intervention. Bernard [1967]:3-6 offers an able defense of the older view.

The newer view finds 1 Corinthians too mild for the description in 2 Cor. 7:8, and hypothesizes that the painful visit occurs after the writing of 1 Corinthians, in connection with a serious challenge to Paul's apostolic authority. On this view, the earlier letter has probably been lost. The new view is accessible in Bruce 1977:273-279.

Three points urge us to give the older view a serious hearing.

1. It is the simpler view, since it does not require us to hypothesize the existence of a missing letter.
2. It is misleading to speak baldly, as the newer view often does, of "the stern letter." The description of sorrow in 2 Corinthians applies not to the letter, but to its effect on the readers. Perhaps only a part of the letter made people sorrowful. In the first six chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul rebukes the Corinthians rather bluntly for several errors--their party spirit (chapter 1), their immaturity (chapter 3), their tolerance of fornication (chapter 5), their lawsuits and harlotry (chapter 6). He speaks to shame them (6:5), and warns that he will shortly come to them with a rod if they do not straighten out (4:21). These chapters certainly are stern enough to cause the reaction described in 2 Corinthians.
3. 2 Cor. 7:12 suggests that the offense was not against Paul (as the newer view requires) but against someone else (the father of the immoral man, according to the older theory).

The Corinthian epistles teach the same principles of discipline and restoration whether we understand them to describe the same offense or two different ones. These brief observations show that it is by no means impossible that they describe the same case, as I suggest in this chapter.

15.6 Other Explanations of "One-Woman Man"

Several different explanations have been proposed for the phrase "one-woman man" that Paul uses in 1 Tim. 3:2,12 and Titus 1:6 to describe those who serve officially in the church.

- Perhaps Paul is talking about people who are divorced and remarried.
- Some people think the terms refer to polygamy or marital infidelity.
- Another view disqualifies people who have remarried after the death of a spouse.

Arguments rage long and furious over which of these Paul means. The confusion arises because, apparently, Paul is not using a common idiom for a particular marital situation, but rather is constructing the phrase on the spot. Thus we cannot appeal to other occurrences of the phrase to learn its precise meaning.

Because we cannot pin down the term on the basis of usage, it is unwise to use it to determine Paul's attitude toward divorce, or polygamy, or remarriage after a spouse dies. We must determine these attitudes from other texts. From the rest of the New Testament, we can conclude that Paul forbids divorce and remarriage, and also polygamy and outright adultery, but that he allows and even encourages remarriage for widows and widowers. So the first two interpretations of the phrase seem reasonable, while the third is unlikely.

Because the phrase is ambiguous, I have not used it in examining whether remarriage is right or wrong. I make this decision on the grounds of other passages. I do cite the "one-woman man" texts, though, in exploring the implications of a person's marital status for certain types of public ministry.

Advocates of the remarriage interpretation frequently try to show that polygamy was rare in the first century, so that Paul must be referring to remarriage. In response, people who allow remarriage under some circumstances try to document cases of polygamy in the first century, as though that could exclude divorce from Paul's reference. Both claims are largely beside the point.

Precisely because Paul's expression is ambiguous and without clear parallel, we should not restrict its meaning only to remarriage, or only to polygamy. Paul could have made either of these explicit, had he wished. He does not, and we should be careful not to say more than he does.

The simplest position, and the one I take, is that the "one-woman man" requirement excludes any form of infidelity. The Scriptures permit remarriage after death, so it does not exclude a man from leadership. They condemn polygamy, adultery, and remarriage after divorce, so these conditions do disqualify a man.

In other words, the phrase is a generic description, not a technical term for remarriage, polygamy, or adultery. Because it is generic, we cannot use it to learn Paul's view on any one of these conditions. But if we know from other passages that he condemns a certain form of multiple marriage, we can conclude from this text that people who have been in such a marriage are excluded from church leadership.

15.7 Ezekiel 44:22

Jay Adams 1980:85 cites Ezek. 44:22 as evidence that the Old Testament permits remarriage after divorce.

But a widow or a divorced woman they shall not take to themselves as wives, but virgins of the seed of the house of Israel, or that widow who shall be a priest's widow, shall they take.

He remarks,

The whole force of the verse is to specify requirements peculiar to priests. If no one was allowed to marry a divorced person anyway, the prohibition would be pointless. Only if the practice was generally acceptable is the verse of significance, since only then would it mark out an exception to the general rule.

The verse occurs in the part of Ezekiel that anticipates the restoration of temple worship in Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Like much of this part of Ezekiel, the verse echoes a provision of the Mosaic Law, in this case Lev. 21:7,13,14:

A harlot woman, or one defiled, they shall not take; and a woman divorced from her husband they shall not take, for he is holy unto his God. . . . He shall take a woman in her virginity. A widow, or a divorcee, or one defiled, a harlot: these he shall not take, but a virgin from his people shall he take as wife.

By Adams' argument, these verses indicate that the Law permits laymen to marry harlots, as well as widows and divorcees. On the contrary, the Law decrees that a girl who plays the harlot in her father's house is to be stoned (Deut. 22:21). Stoning, not marriage, is the lawful treatment of a harlot.

The legislation of Ezek. 44:22 and Lev. 21:7-14 forbids priests to marry divorcees and harlots, not because it is **lawful** for ordinary people to marry them, but because it is **common** for ordinary people to marry them. Unfortunately, the periods when God's people live completely according to his law are few and far between. The Law sometimes makes provision for man's sin by describing what to do next after the sin takes place, or by emphasizing contexts in which the sin is especially abhorrent. It is a mistake to argue from such passages that the sin really isn't sin

after all, just as it is a mistake to argue from the law of divorce in Deuteronomy 24 that the Law of Moses sanctions divorce. The passages in Ezekiel and Leviticus show that marriage of divorcees is not unknown, and that it is specifically forbidden to priests. They do not show that God approves of it for anybody else.

CHAPTER 16 PHYSICAL ABUSE AND DIVORCE

Violence often mars modern homes. We hear of husbands who batter their wives or molest their children. The older caricature of the angry wife throwing dishes and brandishing a butcher knife or a rolling pin at her cowering husband still corresponds to much unhappy reality as well. Many believers who reject divorce for any other cause feel that they must accept it in cases of physical abuse.

Domestic violence is a great problem, and demands divine strength and love for its solution. The Bible does not solve the problem by divorce. It does give hope in other directions. We will see:

- Domestic violence is wrong;
- The threat of physical harm is no grounds for divorce;
- Other means of protection may be available.

16.1 Domestic Violence is Wrong

The strongest biblical warnings against domestic violence condemn the underlying problem of strife. There can be no violence between two people who live in loving harmony. When there is violence, one or both have disobeyed the biblical warnings against strife.

16.1.1 Strife is Wrong

The Bible condemns strife among people. Strife is one characteristic of the "reprobate mind" to which God has abandoned the pagan world (Rom. 1:29, where the AV translates the word "debate"). It marks the unsaved man (1 Cor. 3:3). Paul ranks it with the "works of the flesh" and says that "those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19,20). Believers are to "walk becomingly, as in the day, ~el not in strife" (Rom. 13:13), and Paul warns the Corinthians that such behavior will incur his rebuke when he visits them (2 Cor. 12:20).

None of these warnings is restricted to the home. Bitterness and discord are wrong wherever they occur — in the family, in churches, in the workplace, between nations.

16.1.2 Wives Against Husbands

Wives should not strive with their husbands. God has burdened the man with the responsibility of leading the woman:

The head of woman is the man" (1 Cor. 11:3);

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For man is the head of woman, just as Christ is head of the church, and he is savior of the body. But as the church submits itself to Christ, so should the wives to their own husbands in everything" (Eph. 5:22-24).

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as is fit in the Lord" (Col. 3:18).

"ives, submit yourselves to your own husbands. ... Let [your adorning] be ... a meek and quiet spirit" (1 Pet. 3:1, 3-4).

A Christian wife who is exercising "a meek and quiet spirit" by "submitting" to her husband cannot be striving with him, much less chasing him out of the house amid a hail of pottery.

16.1.3 Husbands Against Wives

Husbands should not strive with their wives.

Man is the head of woman, just as Christ is head of the church, and he is savior of the body. ... Husbands, love your own wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it. ... Men ought to love their own wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church" (Eph. 5:23,25,28-29).

Husbands, love your wives, and do not be bitter against them" (Col. 3:19).

Husbands, dwell together [with your wives] according to knowledge, rendering honor to the wife as to a weaker vessel (1 Pet. 3:7).

As Christ saved his body, the church, so Christian husbands should protect and defend their wives, not seek to harm them.

Some husbands perversely imagine that they can justify chastising their wives because God sometimes chastises the believer. This error confuses the role of a brother with that of a father. Believers are the brethren of the Lord Jesus (John 20:17; Rom. 8:29), and the Bible never describes him as chastising them. It is God the Father who chastises his children (Heb. 12:5-11). The Bible compares the relation of husband and wife to the relation of Christ and his brethren, but never to the relation of God and his children. Husbands have no biblical basis for chastising their wives.

16.1.4 Parents Against Children

Parents are to chastise their children, but this duty does not justify domestic violence. The warnings against strife and discord apply to parents and children as well as other relationships. A father or mother who strikes a child in a spirit of anger or bitterness displays the works of the flesh, not parental responsibility. Strife and discord on the part of a parent lead directly to wrath in the child, and the Bible warns parents, "Do not provoke your children to wrath" (Eph. 6:4).

16.2 Violence is Not Grounds for Divorce.

Domestic violence is wrong. Christians sometimes propose to solve the problem through divorce. They are right to try to help, but their suggestion is misguided, for three reasons.

1. The Bible never says that domestic violence authorizes divorce.
2. Physical violence is not the only way one person can hurt another. If violence justifies divorce, so do many other offenses, and the universal biblical teaching against divorce becomes an unrealistic ideal.
3. If we make a special case out of violence, we ignore the "one flesh" nature of the marriage bond.

16.2.1 Divorce for Violence in the Bible

The problem of domestic violence must have been around in biblical times. The abundant warnings against strife in the New Testament show that people then were prone to the same emotional failings as we are today. It is naive to assume that the ancient home was immune to discord and the physical violence that sometimes erupts from it. Yet the Bible does not authorize divorce because of violence. Paul does not even mention the possibility when he discusses marital separation in 1 Corinthians 7. He allows separation from bed and board for those deserted by an unbeliever, but there is not a whisper about dividing a marriage because of domestic violence.

We cannot explain the Bible's silence on the matter by claiming that it is chauvinistic. Our culture emphasizes violence of men against women, but violence of women against men is just as wrong, and just as likely to happen, given the perversity of the human heart, yet the Bible makes no special provision for a husband to free himself from such a mate. Domestic violence flows in two directions, and the Bible sanctions neither one as an excuse for divorce.

16.2.2 Violence: The Camel's Nose

If the church permits divorce for violence, it does so without any biblical foundation. Is violence such a serious problem that it warrants this special treatment? A person's body is sacred. Perhaps harming it is far worse than other offenses, and merits exceptional action.

The argument sounds convincing, until we try to identify "other offenses" that make violence seem exceptional.

- A man who snarls at his wife may give her bleeding ulcers. Does snarling come within the scope of "domestic violence," and justify divorce?
- A parent who is addicted to tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs will have children who are prone to a variety of physical ailments. Furthermore, second-hand smoke may aggravate a spouse's asthma or emphysema. Is smoking grounds for divorce?
- A lazy breadwinner may not provide an adequate income for his family, and they may suffer malnutrition. Should he be divorced?
- A cook with a lust for rich pastries and red meat may subject other members of the family to heart disease or intestinal cancer. Should we put away a spouse for being a gourmet?

Harming another person's body **is** a serious offense. But our physical well-being is so intertwined with our habits of life and our psychological environment that almost any fault can bring physical harm to the immediate family. If we allow divorce for beating, we should also allow it for snarling, backbiting, or nagging.

An ancient Arabic proverb warns the Bedouin not to let the camel put his nose in the tent, or the rest of him will follow. Among excuses for divorce, domestic violence is the camel's nose. If we accept it, we must also accept other excuses, and then we can hardly claim to take the Bible's strict stance against divorce seriously.

16.2.3 Violence and the "One Flesh" Relationship

Physical abuse seems to sound a special chord of sympathy. It represents the ultimate intrusion of one person into the life of another. This sense of violation, more than anything else, may account for the exceptions that people want to make to God's marriage law to allow divorce for domestic violence.

Ironically, marriage is the only human relationship in which violence is **not** an intrusion of one person into the life of another. As he enters the world's first marriage, Adam realizes, "[My wife] is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23), and the narrator confirms, "They shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). The Hebrew idiom "one flesh" emphasizes not just sexual union, but the merging of two people into one. We can almost translate it, "one person." A man and his wife are one entity before God.

A wife who kicks her husband is not violating another person. She is kicking a part of herself. A husband who beats his wife is beating a part of himself. We would not suggest cutting off the hand of an insane man to keep him from flogging himself. It is equally out of place to suggest that we divide the one flesh of man and wife to stop it from hurting itself.

When two people become one, they make themselves completely vulnerable to one another. The intimacy of being one allows marriage to satisfy the loneliness of celibacy, and gives it its proverbial capacity for unbounded joy. Sadly, that same vulnerability means that if one spouse is demented, the other shares in the consequences. The husband's problems are the wife's, and the wife's, the husband's. Neither can say, "That's the other's problem, not mine." They are one flesh until parted by death.

Some Christians persevere in the face of intense domestic violence, with the thought that death is not the ultimate tragedy, but the "far better" state of being with Christ (Phil. 1:23). However, they draw the line when a spouse abuses their children, and seek a divorce to protect the little ones.

The Bible does not prohibit separating children from a violent or perverted parent for their own protection. Children and parents are not "one flesh," as man and wife are. Moving out is tragic for a spouse, but the natural end of child rearing. Sometimes children must be separated from a violent parent, but that is no excuse for separating the parents from one another. A believing parent should protect children by housing them with relatives or in a foster home, or even giving them up for adoption, before seeking to put asunder what God has joined together. Biblically, the bond between husband and wife is far stronger than that between parent and child. To break either is tragic, but to break the stronger in order to preserve the weaker is perverse and contrary to the Scriptures.

16.3 Remedies for Domestic Violence

The previous two sections pose a dilemma. Violence in the home is sinful and inexcusable. Yet the marriage bond is so strong that even this sin does not dissolve it before God. Should we stand quietly by while one partner destroys the other?

There are alternatives. God governs his people through three institutions: the family, the church, and the civil magistrate. None of these authorities is autonomous. All are subject to the law of God. If one goes astray, the believer should seek help from the other two.

16.3.1 Help from the Church

The home is not independent of the church. 1 Timothy 5:8 gives an example of church jurisdiction over the home.

But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Paul is discussing the care of Christian widows. A man with widowed relatives should support them. Otherwise, the church should reckon him an apostate. Matthew 18:15-17 shows that this discipline takes effect only after the church repeatedly tries to correct him.

Within the home, "the man is head of woman" (1 Cor. 11:3), whether she is his wife or a widowed aunt for whom he is caring. Yet by giving the church jurisdiction over the care of widows, Paul opens the way for a widow to come to the church if her nephew is not providing for her. She is not rebelling against her nephew, but seeking the help of a second authority, the church, when the first, the home, has failed. If she is out of line, the church will tell her so.

1 Timothy 5:8 condemns a man who neglects, not just his widows, but his family members in general. A wife has the same recourse to the church that a widow does. If she is being overly critical of her husband, the church should correct her. Otherwise, it should deal with her husband.

The church can do more than simply exclude the offender. Violence often results from a severe psychological or spiritual disturbance that the violent person cannot directly control. The conduct is still sinful, but it may be treatable. The church should urge not only confession and repentance, but also appropriate biblical counseling to address the underlying problems.

A woman seeking help from the church should go directly to the elders of the assembly. She is invoking the church as a mechanism of authority, not just as a source of fellowship, and the elders bear the responsibility for that authority. If she complains about her husband to the ladies' prayer group, she may win sympathy and start some juicy gossip, but they do not have the jurisdiction to decide her case and seek a solution. The rest of the church should not learn of the problems unless the elders need to make them known so that the church may exercise appropriate discipline.

16.3.2 Help from the State

The home is not independent of the state when its members break the law. God has established the civil ruler as his servant, to protect the upright citizen and execute judgment on the unjust (Rom. 13:3,4). As we discussed in Chapter 8 Ezra's intervention in breaking up families illustrates the authority of the state to enforce its laws over the family. Assault and battery is a criminal offense in most western societies, and God intends the civil magistrate to defend those who are so abused.

Civil administrations differ in the kinds and amount of help they can offer in cases of domestic violence. The authorities may place a violent spouse in an institution to provide therapy and protect the rest of the family. Some communities provide safe houses where a battered spouse may find refuge and counsel. If children are threatened and shelter with relatives is not available, state social agencies may have both the authority and the resources to place them in foster homes.

The state will not share the believer's understanding of the marriage bond, and sometimes may urge divorce as the easiest solution to the problem. The believer recognizes that this is no solution, and will not accept it. Just because one authority (the family) is ungodly is no reason to accept ungodly suggestions from another (the government). One can conceive of a civil government that declares a marriage dissolved if there is violence or abuse. But the magistrate is powerless to dissolve a bond that God has forged, and the believer so separated from a spouse will not consider remarriage unless the other partner dies.

16.3.3 Submission and Seeking Help

A believing wife is not rebelling against her husband in seeking help either from the church or from the state. The Bible does teach that people should be subject to the authorities that God puts over them. It also recognizes that these authorities can rebel against the Lord. The Bible does not ask us to support their rebellion.

For instance, the Bible teaches that believers are to be subject to the church: "Obey those who have the rule over you, and submit yourselves" (Heb. 13:17). Yet an elder's rule can be challenged, for Paul tells Timothy how to rebuke an erring elder (1 Tim. 5:19,20).

As another example, believers are to be subject to the civil magistrate: "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers" (Rom. 13:1). Yet when human leaders command sin, Peter and the other apostles obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

A believing wife who seeks the intervention of the church or the state is protecting not only herself but her spouse as well. In harming her he is harming himself. Her foremost concern ought to be his welfare. Official intervention may be the only way to show him that he has a problem, and lead him to seek help.

Domestic violence is a tragic sin. God has provided some channels of help, by establishing overlapping mechanisms of authority. But he gives us no reason to think that he dissolves the bond of marriage because of this sin. Societies may offer divorce as a solution, and friends may urge it, but the believer will recognize that the marriage bond persists until death.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What underlying attitude leads to domestic violence?
2. Please give three biblical references condemning this attitude.
3. Please evaluate this justification by a man for beating his wife: "God has established me as his representative over my wife. Just as he chastises me when I sin, so I am responsible for chastising her when she sins."
4. Which relationship is stronger--that between man and wife, or that between parent and child? Please support your answer with Scripture.
5. Based on your answer to the last question, please evaluate these strategies for protecting children in cases of domestic violence:
 - (a) Separate the children from the violent spouse by a divorce, leaving the children in the care of the nonviolent spouse;
 - (b) Separate the children from the violent spouse by housing them with relatives or placing them in a foster home.

6. What mechanisms has God established to order the life of his people?
7. Please give a biblical example to show that the church has jurisdiction over the affairs of the home.
8. Please give a biblical example to show that the state has jurisdiction over the affairs of the home.

CHAPTER 17 GOD KNOWS THE WAY OUT

Some biblical laws change as we move through the Scriptures. Animal sacrifices come and go. Patterns of worship change. But the law of marriage is inviolate. The Bible opens in a garden where man learns that his wife is indivisibly part of him, bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2:23). It closes with the vision of a heavenly paradise from which fornicators are excluded (Rev. 22:15). In between, every witness agrees that divorce is wrong and remarriage is adultery.

Modern people do not like absolutes. We prefer to hang loose, to remain flexible, to keep our options open. In the face of expanding knowledge about our universe, we have learned to be cautious about making statements of fact. Our daily lives seem too complex for unvarying rules of behavior. The wisdom of the day insists, "Never say 'Never.'"

Modern people have good reason for their caution. The more technical skill we gain, the more ethical dilemmas we face. New weapons, promising security against our enemies, lead to heightened international tension. The ability to transplant organs from one person to another unleashes the spectre of letting one individual die to prolong the life of another. We have developed powerful mechanisms for redistributing wealth, but we can seldom anticipate all the effects of invoking them. We are like rats in a maze, with no way to see the overall problem. We must try one route, then another, until we stumble on the solution. We are loathe to accept absolute rules, lest they lead us to a dead end.

Perhaps, in the light of this modern caution, we should relax the conclusions we have reached about divorce and remarriage. Can God's Word really be as inflexible as it seems? Have we read something wrong? Are there really no exceptions, no special cases, no bending of the rules?

God's Law seems unrealistic only if we impose human limits on God himself. In fact, God created our world, so he stands outside and above its complexity. He sees the problems and knows the answer. To help us in our dilemma, he speaks to us in the Bible and through his Son (Heb. 1:1,2). He tells us the way out of the maze.

God not only knows our dilemmas better than we do; he can change them. The Bible abounds with examples of mazes whose walls shift at the last moment. God's people, to all appearances trapped beyond hope, suddenly find before them an open door. His enemies, despite their careful plans, find themselves cut off without recourse.

Once we recognize that God knows the way out, our approach to life takes a very different direction from that of our contemporaries.

- They believe that man is his own last hope. We believe that man's Creator can and does help him.
- They value the Bible only as a collection of human wisdom, subject to all the limitations of man himself. We read on its pages the instructions of the Lord God, who can see the way out of our dilemmas.
- They view a dead end in the maze of life as the ultimate disaster, the result of making the wrong choices. We know that God sometimes leads his people into dead ends to show his power by opening doors in blank walls.

Ahab, king of Israel, is a shrewd man, and in conference with his advisors, determines that the time is right to mount a military campaign against Syria. They want to recapture Ramoth Gilead, an Israelite city that Syria conquered years before (1 Kings 22:3). He persuades Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, to accompany him on the expedition. Jehoshaphat asks that they first seek the Lord's instruction. A military venture is a maze of the worst sort. The adversary is intelligent, the payoff is uncertain, and the risks are high. Jehoshaphat wants to know what the maze looks like from heaven's perspective.

Ahab's court prophets give him the answer he wants:

Go up, and the Lord will give [Ramoth-Gilead] into the king's hand (22:6).

Jehoshaphat suspects their motives, and asks for a second opinion. Through Micaiah the son of Imlah, God announces that the campaign will end in Ahab's death (22:17-23). The narrator shows us the accuracy of this prediction, for the king of Syria instructs his commanders,

Do not fight with small or with great, but only with the king of Israel (22:31).

Ahab faces a decision. He can heed God's warning, but then he will insult his court prophets, and appear frightened before his own army. Such a show of weakness could invite a coup. His other option is to hope that God's warning is not absolute. Perhaps God only means to point out the general danger of the mission. Surely, if Ahab takes special precautions, he can escape death.

Ahab chooses to trust in his cleverness rather than in God's Word. He persuades Jehoshaphat to wear his royal robes into battle, while Ahab himself is disguised to avoid recognition (22:30). As he hopes, the ruse succeeds in drawing the attack toward Jehoshaphat and away from himself, at least for a while (22:32,33). It seems that he is successful in navigating the maze by himself. But a near-sighted Syrian soldier, in the excitement of the battle, shoots off an arrow at random, and it finds its way between the joints of Ahab's armor, where even the most skilled marksman would have had trouble guiding it (22:34). By evening, Ahab is dead.

Pity Ahab. His is the way of modern man. His world is complex — too complex, certainly, to be comprehended by the simple absolute revelations of God. After all, what does the Lord know about military strategies, or the politics of king and court? He hears God just as much as he pleases, but no more. Then he makes his own decisions and guides his own fate--or so he thinks, until the path that seemed to promise a way out of the maze ends with a stray arrow.

How different is the campaign on which Moses leads Israel out of Egypt. Moses is every bit as human as Ahab, as we see in his reluctance before the burning bush (Exod. 3,4). In the end, he accepts his commission. God sends him to Pharaoh with a simple command: "Let my people go" (5:1).

Moses is no stranger to Pharaoh's court. He was raised there, as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. Surely he knows that outright demands are no way to win favors from an oriental despot, especially if they cost him all of his slaves. Perhaps Moses should just ask for a few tribes. And a command from the slaves' God is not likely to motivate the Egyptian king. Moses would do much better to argue that the barracks are overcrowded. But God's command allows no such finessing.

You shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: Israel is my son, my firstborn. And I say to you, 'Let my son go, that he may serve me. And if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your son, your firstborn'" (4:22,23).

Moses carries the message as God commands, and Pharaoh responds as we might expect. He not only refuses to grant what he considers an insolent request, but increases the load laid on the Israelites to distract their minds from any further foolishness. The people complain so bitterly to Moses that he challenges the Lord,

Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why have you sent me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all (5:22,23).

For all that Moses or the elders of Israel can see, God has driven them into a dead end. But God patiently responds, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh" (6:1). And he proceeds to unleash the ten plagues on the land of Egypt.

Eventually Pharaoh relents, and the people pack up to leave. The Lord guides them along a route that leads to the shores of the Red Sea. Then Pharaoh, humiliated at having given in, leads his army out against the refugees. When the Israelites find the sea before them and the Egyptians at their heels, they once again complain.

Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What is this that you have done to us, to bring us out of Egypt? Wasn't this the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, "Let us alone, and we will serve Egypt. For it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the wilderness" (14:11,12).

How they wish Moses hadn't been so dogmatic about God's command. Couldn't he just have allegorized it into a promise of spiritual freedom? If only he hadn't taken God so literally, they wouldn't be up against this dead end.

By now, Moses has learned that God leads his people into dead ends to show them his power. He replies,

Don't be afraid. Take your stand, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will perform for you today. . . . The LORD shall fight for you; and as for you, you shall be quiet (14:13,14).

They should hold their tongue. How dare they suggest that he should not follow God's instruction? God has led them into this dilemma. He will lead them out.

And lead them out he does. Like a door in the wall of a maze, a path opens through the Red Sea. Israel marches across on dry land, and when the Egyptian host tries to pursue them, God buries them beneath the waters. To this day, Jew and Christian alike remember the victory at the Red Sea. It was a great victory. It happened only because Moses was not afraid to let God lead the nation into a dead end in order to show his power.

Where is the way of Ahab? It surrounds us on every side. There are many who say of God's marriage law, "That's too absolute, too inflexible. We know a better way." They try to bend God's revelation, trusting more in their own myopic view of the maze than in the overall perspective that he gives. They agree that, in general, marriage should be permanent. But they think they know enough to make some exceptions to God's rules. Sadly, they are not wise enough to avoid the wayward arrows around which God could have guided them.

Where is the God of Moses? He is still here, too. He still gives his people instructions, as he did to Moses. Sometimes those instructions seem just as foolish and inflexible as did God's commission for Moses. Yet that commission led straight into a miracle.

Marriage abounds with dead ends: a couple who cannot agree on how to manage their money; a husband who beats his wife; a woman who abandons her believing husband and their children; a newly-saved divorcee who longs for the fellowship of a Christian home. It seems so easy to find our way out of the maze ourselves. We allow a divorce here, a remarriage there, not as violations of the biblical law, but as the "exceptions that prove the rule." Ahab's arrow warns that this way lies disaster.

In fact, "impossible" problems show that God intends to make us part of a miracle. Just when the path seems most completely blocked, he says to us, as he said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do." Sometimes he works quickly; sometimes slowly. But he will work, if only we do not interfere.

Don't be afraid. Take your stand, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will perform for you today.

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