

**THE MUSICAL MARRIAGE-GO-ROUND
AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE
IN MATTHEW 19:9**

WHOEVER

**(1) DIVORCES HIS WIFE...EXCEPT FOR SEXUAL IMMORALITY
AND
(2) MARRIES ANOTHER...
COMMITS ADULTERY.**

The question of divorce and subsequent remarriage is one that cannot be escaped in the church of today. Even among professing Christians, the "musical marriage" syndrome plays its tune. This is no idle exegetical exercise to brush up one's Greek, but a burning issue in which countless lives are at stake. It impacts issues of church discipline and membership, as well as eligibility for missionary service.¹ It is with this urgency in mind that we search the Scriptures seeking answers to questions we hoped would never be asked.

We must first turn our attention to the technicalities of our text, including pertinent words, and then to the context in which it occurs. In addition to immediate context, we find several parallel passages within the gospels: Matthew 5:31-32, Mark 10:10-12, and Luke 16:18. The writings of the apostle Paul must not be overlooked, as he addresses this matter in 1 Corinthians 7:10-15 and Romans 7:1-3. His instructions to the Corinthians clarify that the gospel passages come within a covenantal context, applying to the marriage of two *believers* rather than a religiously mixed marriage.² The Old Testament background in

¹ Robert Morris wrestles with this matter in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 1984, p. 214-224, as an increasing number of divorced applicants apply for cross-cultural missionary service in organizations such as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, North Africa Mission, and Africa Inland Mission. Tough questions face the boards who develop policies in such matters.

² Murray, p. 70; Adams, p. 37.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is particularly pertinent, yet other passages supply essential background, particularly as we consider God's relationship with Israel (Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and His dealings with Old Testament saints such as David.

God has provided us with a wealth of texts which must be carefully considered in relation to each other. A thick book would be needed to address all of the questions raised by these passages. Thus our discussion must focus on the specific issues raised in Matthew 19:9, or relevant to its exegesis. These include the validity of the sinful divorce, the application of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 in the new covenant age, and eligibility for remarriage of those addressed by this verse. Related texts speak to the new spouse of the person who was sinfully divorced (Matthew 5:31-32, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18) and application to ordained pastors/elders (2 Timothy 3:2-7). We can only touch on these important issues.

The questions that might be asked are legion. Matthew 19:9 is a pivotal text because it addresses *two* key issues, in contrast to parallel gospel texts: (1) grounds for biblical divorce, and (2) remarriage.³ A clear exegesis of this verse should provide a solid foundation for moving on to the exploration of related texts and questions.

Textual Variants. Matthew 19:9 offers the exegete a wonderful opportunity to apply his skills in textual criticism! Two variants confront the reader, each with an impressive array of variations on a theme. The first variant concerns the phrase, "*me epi porneia kai gamese allen.*" Its major competitor substitutes the precise reading of a portion of Matthew 5:32, "*parektos logou porneias poiei auten moicheuthenia,*" which adds to the exception clause the thought of causing the divorced wife to commit

³ Murray calls it the "most pivotal passage in the NT" about divorce, p. 33.

adultery. Three additional variants, with minimal support, offer varied attempts to import the wording of Matthew 5:32. Each of the two major competitors claims a key Alexandrian fourth century uncial, Codex Sinaiticus (A) supporting the choice of the UBS editors and Codex Vaticanus (B) preferring the version echoing Matthew 5:32. Because a lengthy list of uncials and miniscules add their support to the first reading, and because the variants are all readily explained by attempts to harmonize with Matthew 5, it appears wise to accept the reading of the UBS text as it is.

The second variant shows us five various additions to the main verb, *moichatai*, focusing on the point in Matthew 5:32 concerning the new spouse of the divorced woman who remarries. Variations within these variants include slightly different forms of *gameo*, a couple omitting the initial *moichatai*, and one adding *hosautos*. The textual evidence is not impressive for any of these, and like the first variant, can be readily seen as additional attempts at harmony with Matthew 5. The Codex Sinaiticus again supports the simple *moichatai* seen in the UBS text, along with other manuscripts, versions, and two church fathers. The UBS text is best left as it stands.⁴

Morphology and Syntax. The content of Jesus' statement presents us with a **substantival relative clause** beginning with the relative pronoun *hos* (normally determinative, "the one who"⁵) and continuing until we reach the main verb, *moichatai*, the last word of this verse. This entire phrase forms the subject of the statement, with a construction similar to the protasis of a first class conditional clause, thus allowing the possibility of a condition-like translation. The **subjunctive** indicates a

⁴ John Murray, in his helpful book *Divorce*, p. 48-50, draws similar conclusions.

⁵ Zerwick, p. 68.

contingency, a hypothetical realm presented for consideration.⁶ The appearance of the particle *an* with the subjunctive is additional evidence of a conditional clause.⁷

The **ao**rist, used for the **two subjunctives** (*apoluse* and *game*se), is appropriate to depict a punctuated action, one that is contemplated as a completed process. It is not necessarily a *past* action, but may be used in a gnomic sense as occurring in any temporal sphere.⁸ Both "to divorce" and "to marry" are punctuated verbs, rather than progressive actions; the latter might be seen as inceptive, entrance into the state of being married. The aorist subjunctive is often used to express a future condition, as it is here. The conjunction *kai*, which has a variety of uses, in this case joins the two aorist subjunctives. Zerwick notes the use of *kai* to coordinate two ideas, "one of which depends upon the other as being a further determination of it."⁹ This usage fits the coordination of verbs in this verse, and is critical to exegesis. Although divorce is occasioned by sin, not every divorce followed by remarriage is *necessarily* sin; the exception clause here makes this evident.

The **exception clause** uses the negative *me* to denote "except." This is unusual, but it is dependent on *hos an*, which is equivalent here to *ean tis*.¹⁰ The preposition *epi* may also occasionally mean "except," or "in addition to,"¹¹ but used here with the dative of respect, *porneia*, is best translated simply as

⁶ Porter, p. 245-247; 57.

⁷ BDF, p. 191.

⁸ Porter, p. 35, 38.

⁹ Zerwick, p. 155.

¹⁰ Zerwick, p. 148-149.

¹¹ Zerwick, inconsistently (see footnote 8) references this verse as an example, p. 43.

"on the basis of" or "because of."¹² (Note similar construction of *epi* with the dative in the key phrase, *eph ho* in Romans 5:12.¹³)

The **main verb**, *moichatai*, is found in the present middle indicative, providing key exegetical information. The middle voice is one that emphasizes the direct involvement and participation of the subject, either acting with respect to himself or to another.¹⁴ This choice of voice thus underscores the responsibility of the husband who divorces his wife without biblical warrant. The present tense raises significant exegetical questions, particularly if pressed to literalistic extremes.¹⁵

Clause Construction. This verse ought to be seen as a type of conditional (reason-result) clause, with the apodosis (condition) encompassing both the sinful divorce *and* subsequent remarriage, and the protasis (result of that condition) being the committing of adultery (the main verb).

Key Words. The words *porneia* and *moichao* need to be clearly defined and distinguished. The word for divorce, *apoluo*, should be compared with other New Testament words of similar meaning, *chorizo* (19:6) and *aphiemi*.

Porneia is the basis on which a biblical divorce may be granted. It is a broad word for immorality used to denote all kinds of illicit sexual intercourse. It frequently implies prostitution. There is figurative use in the Old Testament for apostasy from God, or idolatry (book of Hosea; Jeremiah 2:20, 3:2 & 9, 13:27; Ezekiel 16:15, 22, 25-26, 33-34, 36, 41; 23:7-8, 11, 14, 17-19, 27, 29-30, 35; 43:7, 9; Micah 1:7; Nahum 3:4;

¹² Greenlee, p. 35.

¹³ BDF, p. 123.

¹⁴ Zerwick, p. 72; Porter, p. 67.

¹⁵ Keener, *...And Marries Another*, p. 48, cites an article suggesting the gnomic present: C. D. Osborn, "The Use of the Present Tense in Matthew 19:9," *RestQ* 24 (4, 1981), p. 193-203.

Revelation 2:21, 9:21, 14:8, 18:3, 19:2).¹⁶ The word is used for incest (1 Corinthians 5:1), homosexuality (Jude 7), and the sin of 23,000 ancient Israelites (1 Corinthians 10:8). It is regarded as a sin against one's own body (1 Corinthians 6:18) and is caused by lust (1 Corinthians 7:2). It pollutes the church (2 Corinthians 12:19ff). Paul uses it to describe sexual immorality in Romans 1:29, Galatians 5:19 (with other works of the flesh), Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 3:5, and 1 Thessalonians 4:3. Although the sexually immoral are excluded from God's kingdom (1 Corinthians 6:9), forgiveness is possible (1 Corinthians 6:11, Hebrew 11:31). The Septuagiant uses *porneia* for harlotry (Tamar in Genesis 38:24; Gomer in the book of Hosea) and in a broader sense for unfaithfulness to God (Numbers 14:33), as well as apostasy (quotations above from OT prophets and Revelation). Later Judaism broadened the usage to include incest, sodomy, unlawful marriage, and illicit sex in general. The non-Jewish culture, where extramarital affairs were common, understood *porneia* as engaging in "harlotry for hire," including cultic prostitution.¹⁷

One highly restrictive view of Matthew 19:9, which effectively excludes remarriage under almost all circumstances, understands *porneia* in the restricted sense of Leviticus 18:6-18, as marriage to a near relative; evidence is cited from the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹⁸ However, a close examination of Old and New Testament uses, as shown above, refutes this narrow position.

Moichao, a more restricted term, is to commit adultery. It is used only four times in the New Testament, in Matthew 19:9 and its parallels (Matthew 5:32, Mark 10:11, 12). The similar verb *moicheuo* is used more often, and generally is defined according to the marital status of the woman (Matthew 5:27-28, 32; 19:18; Mark

¹⁶ Bauer, p. 693; Liddel and Scott, p. 662; Louw and Nida, 88.271.

¹⁷ TWOT, p. 912.

10:19; Luke 16:18, 18:20; John 8:4; Romans 2:22, 13:9; James 2:11; Revelation 2:22). It is forbidden by the Decalogue and subject to the death penalty (Deuteronomy 22:22). Like *porneia*, it is used in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel to describe Israel's apostasy. The Greek and Roman world forbid women to practice adultery, giving the family the right of revenge, even by death. It was common practice, however, for *husbands* to commit adultery freely.¹⁹ Thus both the Jewish and Gentile cultures of biblical times recognize some distinction between *porneia* and *moicheia*.

The term *apoluo* is used in Matthew 19:9 for the verb divorce. The terms *chorizo* (Matthew 19:6) and *aphiemi* are used similarly by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, where the term "unmarried" (*agamos*) clarifies that nothing less than legal divorce is intended.²⁰ This is important to recognizing that a divorce obtained on unbiblical grounds (other than for *porneia*) is a valid *although sinful* divorce. Although it is true that the remarriage described here is called *adultery*,²¹ Jesus surely does not warn against the impossible when He commands His hearers not to separate (*chorizo*) what God has joined (19:6).²² Some argue about the right of the state to regulate marriage in a setting that is not theocratic, proposing that the church maintain its own records concerning marriages and divorces, barring even *repentant* remarried persons from church membership unless they break the new marriage as evidence of their repentance.²³ While there are genuine concerns to be appreciated in this approach, relevant Scripture texts point to the recognition that a divorce has really occurred, sinful

¹⁸ Paul Steel and Charles Ryrie defend this position recently in "Point and Counterpoint," *Fundamentalist Journal* (June 1984), pp. 16-20.

¹⁹ TWOT, p. 605-606.

²⁰ Adams, p. 33.

²¹ Murray, p. 42.

²² Adams, p. 43. Similarly, Deuteronomy 24:4 forbids a remarried woman to *again* become the wife of her first husband, who divorced her; the clear implication is that the divorce was valid.

though it is. Murray's otherwise fine exegetical work is hindered by his claim that sinfully divorced persons are "still married in God's eyes."²⁴ It is more helpful to acknowledge "that the divorced parties *have no right in God's eyes to be in a divorced state.*"²⁵

Surrounding Context (Matthew 18-19). The pericope in which our verse appears, Matthew 19:1-9, occurs at a time when Jesus is on His way to the cross. He has begun to teach in a much more confrontational manner, one that antagonizes His enemies. This passage is surrounded by teachings that emphasize humility, forgiveness, and restoration in interpersonal relationships, along with a high standard for discipleship. The greatest in God's kingdom is childlike (18:1-5). Discipleship involves radical amputation (18:6-9), seeking the lost (10-14), patient restoration of the brother who sins (15-20), and forgiveness modeled after God's supreme example (21-35). Additional teaching about children is presented immediately after this pericope (19:13-15), followed by the radical challenge to the wealthy young ruler who thought he was righteous (19:16-30). Similar themes (Mark 9-10) surround the parallel passage in Mark 10:10-12. Matthew's other reference to divorce and remarriage (5:31-32) is preceded by Christ's insistence on the significance of the *heart*; even a lustful look constitutes adultery by His impeccable standards (5:27-30). These teachings collide head-on with the abominable attitude of the Pharisees, whose primary concern is with twisting legal formalities, stretching the law of God to serve the lusts of their evil hearts.

Immediate Context (19:3-12). The Pharisees have not approached Jesus with a sincere desire for truth, but specifically in order

²³ Nymeyer, p. 58-59, in a proposal to the CRC denomination.

²⁴ Murray, p. 25.

²⁵ Adams, p. 67.

to test Him (see also 9:14, 34; 12:2, 14, 24, 38; 15:1; 16:1). They are determined to kill Him and are seeking charges to bring against Him. Both questions they pose, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife *for any reason?*" (19:3) and "Why then did Moses command 'to give (her) a certificate of divorce and to send her away?'" (19:7), allude to an ongoing interpretative debate, between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, concerning the meaning of "some indecency" in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. If Jesus sides with the strict Shammai interpreters, they can accuse Him of inconsistency when He eats with sinners. Yet if He supports the lax school of Hillel, they can charge Him with moral laxity. They have painted Him into a corner--or so they think!²⁶

Old Testament Context. It is most appropriate here to review the **OT background** found in **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**. A careful reading of the passage reveals the protasis ("if and when") encompassing verses 1-3, followed by the apodosis in verse 4--the regulation based on the condition.²⁷ Moses *recognizes* the practice of divorce, including the legal documentation required to discourage hasty action, but in no way encourages or commands it. Here he merely *regulates* the practice in *one* specific particular, forbidding remarriage to the original husband when the wife has remarried following divorce.²⁸ Both Pharisaic schools have twisted the passage to give themselves license to divorce, on the basis of "something indecent." This much discussed phrase is duplicated in Deuteronomy 23:15, where it relates to human excrement. The term "indecent" refers to the uncovering of nakedness, sometimes

²⁶ Calvin, p. 378; Hill, p. 714.

²⁷ The Hebrew verb structure supports this conclusion. There is a string of WCP's beginning with the writing of a bill of divorce in 24:1. The WCP is conditioned by the preceding verb, here the perfect, when he *found* "something indecent" in her. Thus the actions that follow are all part of the condition under which the command of 24:4 (modal imperfect of obligation) is applicable. See Dr. Mark Futato's notes for Hebrew IV.

²⁸ Adams, p. 62; Murray, p. 5, 9.

incestuous (Leviticus 18:7-11, 15, 17-19), sometimes Israel's spiritual harlotry (Ezekiel 16:10, 18, 29, 36-37; Hosea 2:11; Lamentations 1:8), and other times nakedness in a more generic sense (Genesis 9:23; Isaiah 40:3, 47:3; Ezekiel 16:8, 22:10). The term cannot be equated with adultery or sexual immorality in general,²⁹ but is vague, perhaps to cover a wide range of potential situations in which divorce has occurred.

Nothing in the text of Matthew 19:3-12 indicates that Jesus has overturned the specific regulation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, which does not endorse, encourage, much less command, divorce. It is likely that Paul was considering this passage when he commanded divorced believers to remain unmarried (1 Corinthians 7:11), since remarriage would forever prohibit their reconciliation.³⁰

Jesus turns the tables on His self-righteous inquirers, supposedly skilled in legal matters. *Haven't they even read Genesis?!* (See Matthew 12:3, 21:42, 22:23ff; Mark 12:17-18; Luke 20:27-38 for similar responses.) Bypassing the disputed text, written to regulate one consequence of sin, He draws them back to the time *prior* to man's first sin, showing them their Creator's intention. The words for "leave" and "cleave" are both intense; this is "certainly no half-hearted action."³¹ Thus the man who divorces his wife tears apart his own flesh. The words of Genesis 2:24 show marriage to be instituted by divine initiative. In appealing to creation, Jesus utilized accepted rabbinical methodology, wherein the more original words carried the most weight.³² Radical contrasts are to be noted here. God joins; man sinfully separates. In doing so he reflects the rupture between God and man, a separation basic to all human misery. This is no light matter!

²⁹ Hill, p. 280, claims that "something indecent" is marital unfaithfulness.

³⁰ Adams, p. 31.

³¹ Lenski, p. 481.

It is only due to man's hardness of heart that divorce is *allowed* as a limited concession. The Pharisees ask why Moses *commanded* divorce, whereas Jesus responds that Moses merely *permitted* it, contrary to standards established before the Fall. Yet the parallel account in Mark 10:10-12 reverses the two words. Jesus asks what Moses *commanded*; the Pharisees themselves clarify that it was a mere *permission!* Jesus perhaps made reference to the Mosaic legislation as a whole. In both Matthew and Mark, the Pharisees' questions represent calculated trickery. Each time, Jesus reverts to the creation ordinance and His authoritative interpretation bulldozes the plot. Nothing exegetically significant should be attached to the word switch here.

Jesus introduces drastically new standards as His teaching comes to a climax in verse 9. Even the disciples are astounded (19:10). Yet the reader must recall God's glorious OT promises to write His law on the *hearts* of new covenant believers (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Deuteronomy 30:6), thus abrogating the need for concessions to hard hearts. Matthew's earlier statement about divorce is preceded by Christ's teaching that adultery originates in the *heart* (5:27-30). The stricter standard introduced is accompanied by the power of the indwelling Spirit.

The exception clause, though not the main thrust of our Lord's teaching here, acknowledges that the state of eternal glory does not yet exist. Sin continues, even adultery among believers. Normally, the marital bond is broken only by the death of one spouse. Paul presupposes this basic fact in the analogy presented in Romans 7:1-3. It would detract from the force of his analogy if he introduced the abnormal situation of adultery, wherein the created order is violated and the "one flesh" union ripped apart.

³² Morris, p. 480-481.

Only in this radical situation does Jesus *allow*, but not *obligate*, the husband to divorce his wife.

Mark and Luke omit the exception clause, focusing on the fundamental principle of permanency in marriage. An exception is not necessarily stated every time the general principle is enunciated, so we cannot conclude that either evangelist intended to deny it. Unlike Matthew, they do not specifically address the man whose wife has committed adultery.³³ Perhaps the difference in their audiences accounts for the omission; Matthew directs his gospel largely to Jews, who would be familiar with the disputed background in Deuteronomy 24. Mark, writing to Gentiles, addresses the *woman* who has been sinned against (10:12), reflecting a social order quite unfamiliar to Jews. Here is a clue that the *audience* is important to a writer's decisions about what material should be included. Matthew reiterates the exception in 5:31-32, but addresses here the remarriage of the divorced *wife*.

It is important to underscore that divorce is only *permitted*, not *required*, for a spouse's adultery. Forgiveness is the preferable solution. In view of Christ's imperative teachings on that subject, Jay Adams points out that divorce is an alternative restricted to the situation where a spouse *refuses* to repent.³⁴

Origin of Divorce for Sexual Sin. Even in the OT, there is precedent for divorce, rather than stoning, in the event of sexual sin. David was not put to death for his adultery with Bathsheba, but rather received God's mercy when he repented. Joseph's decision to divorce Mary secretly, rather than following the provisions of Deuteronomy 22:23-39, implies that divorce was an

³³ Murray, p. 51-52.

³⁴ Adams, p. 57.

accepted solution.³⁵ Even more significantly, God's relationship with His spiritually adulterous "wife," Israel (note the analogy throughout Hosea, reiterated by other prophets), points to the substitution of divorce for the death penalty (Isaiah 50:1, Jeremiah 3:8), and ultimately to forgiveness and restoration (Isaiah 54:6-8).

Remarriage. Not *all* remarriage is sinful. Paul encourages young widows to remarry (1 Timothy 5:14). Even a divorced believer may remarry without sin, assuming his biblical obligations have been met (1 Corinthians 7:27-28a). The prohibition of Ezekiel 44:22, wherein a *priest* may not marry a divorced woman, implies that others *may* do so. But Scripture clearly regulates remarriage.

The texts in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Mark 10:10-12, Luke 16:18, and Matthew 5:31-32 all speak to the remarriage of the wife whose husband has sinfully divorced her. The second marriage *defiles* the woman and prevents her from ever returning to her original husband. When the husband wrongly files for divorce, he implicates himself in that act of defilement.³⁶

Matthew 19:9 turns the spotlight on the *husband's* subsequent remarriage. Having sinfully initiated divorce (on grounds other than his wife's "porneia"), he is not at liberty to remarry, but rather is obligated to pursue reconciliation (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Remarriage on his part constitutes adultery. Note, however, the implication that if he obtains his divorce on the specific biblical grounds, he is released from marital obligations and may remarry. Nevertheless, he ought to consider other relevant Scripture and make every effort toward restoration and

³⁵ Adams, p. 70. Leon Morris cites evidence for this from two sources: Israel Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (New York, 1967), p. 74, and G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, II (Cambridge, 1958), p. 125.

³⁶ Adams, p. 65; Murray, p. 23-24.

reconciliation, rather than seeking the fastest escape route through the "letter of the law."

The Authority of Christ! Throughout the gospels, Jesus affirms the permanent validity of the OT law and prophets, appealing to its authority in controversy. Matthew is particularly noted for his extensive OT citations, emphasizing prophetic fulfillment. In 5:17-19, Jesus not only stresses the eternal binding force of the OT, but initiates a new era of divine revelation. The antitheses of this chapter, including the teaching on divorce in 5:31-32, present Him as possessing absolute authority.³⁷ He is uniquely and supremely qualified to interpret the OT law in terms of its full implications. The crowds are amazed at the authority with which He teaches (Matthew 7:28). While He upholds the OT law and prophets, His own words are equally authoritative. He completes yet *transcends* prior revelation.³⁸

Even more than the other gospel writers, Matthew presents a radical critique of the old covenant people and their repudiation of Jesus as the Christ. The teachings of our Lord bring out the comprehensive and precise demands of God, exposing the corrupt interpretations that prevailed in that day. He teaches specific applications of the central command to love God with one's entire being. Matthew 19:9 is one instance where He profoundly displays His sovereign authority, starkly contrasted with the technical bickering of the religious leaders. *He shows His listeners Who He is* as He authoritatively reveals the permanent marital bond intended by the Creator, a union designed to reflect the relationship between God and man. In exposing the sinfulness of divorce, He underscores the fundamental rupture between God and man that precedes it, a breach that *He Himself* will restore when He takes the Church--cleansed by His own blood--to be His Bride.

³⁷ Stonehouse, p. 2-3.

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Summary of Exegetical Conclusions:

(1) Matthew 19:9 addresses the marriage of two *believers*, rather than the religiously mixed marriage of 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.

(2) The only valid biblical grounds for divorce is sexual immorality (*porneia*). Divorce for any other reason is sin.

(3) Even so, *forgiveness* is preferable to divorce.

(4) Not all remarriage is necessarily sinful. It constitutes adultery when a believer divorces his wife for a reason *other than* sexual immorality, and subsequently remarries.

³⁸ Stonehouse, p. 210.

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