

**Divorce and Remarriage:
Another look at the Matthean
“exception” clauses.**

Andrew S. Kulikovsky B.App.Sc.(Hons) M.A.
South Australian Coordinator
Centre for Worldview Studies
15 Prince of Wales Court,
Wynn Vale, SA
Australia 5127
ph: +618 8251 6670
<http://www.worldviewstudies.com>

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Abstract

The general consensus among evangelicals is that the Matthean divorce pericopes teach that divorce and remarriage are permitted when a marriage is broken by adultery. However, is such a view defensible from Scripture? Given that divorce and remarriage is an ever-increasing occurrence among Christians, another look at the Biblical data is warranted. A fresh analysis of the Matthean divorce pericopes is undertaken, new grammatical options are presented, the context is re-evaluated and Matthew's redactional concerns are also given their due weight. The application of love, forgiveness and grace are also discussed.

Divorce and Remarriage: Another Look at the Matthean “exception” Clauses

INTRODUCTION

The rate of divorce and remarriage among Christians has risen dramatically in recent years, and is now beginning to reach epidemic proportions. This is a serious problem facing the church, as the family unit breaks down at the foundations. Since almost everyone has either divorced friends, divorced family or are themselves divorced, discussions of divorce and remarriage have tended to be highly emotional. It is sometimes difficult to stay objective when the discussion relates to one's own experience or the experience of family and friends. As Craig Blomberg notes: “Clear thinking about Biblical teaching on marriage and divorce seems to be as rare these days as healthy Christian marriages.”¹ Therefore, interpreters must be careful not to allow their own experience and circumstances to influence their handling of the data.

In order to conduct an objective study of Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-12, the discussion must not be based on analogies, Aristotelian logic, or supposed cultural backgrounds,² but on a solid exegesis of the Biblical text, especially the so-called “exception clauses.” As S. E. Porter and P. Buchanan rightly point out:

The ambiguity of Matt 19:9 invokes problems of semantics, context, and linguistic convention, so it is useless to appeal to logic for clarification. In this case, problems with interpretation can only be clarified by a study of the usage of the term “except” in the original language, its context, and its relation to the other gospels, not by an attempt to find the logical structure of its English translation.³

It is the intention of this paper to present such an analysis. Although there is a great deal of existing literature on these passages, I believe that most interpreters have not paid close enough attention to the literary context and Matthew's redactional concerns. In addition, many commentators also fail to follow their interpretation to its logical conclusion by considering the implications.

The general consensus among evangelicals is that the Matthean divorce pericopes teach that divorce and subsequent remarriage are permitted when a marriage is broken by adultery.⁴ However, is such a view defensible from Scripture? Given that divorce and remarriage is an ever-increasing occurrence among Christians, another look at these exceptions is warranted. In the following sections this author's intent is to undertake a fresh analysis of the Matthean divorce pericopes. New grammatical options will be presented, the context will be re-evaluated, and Matthew's redactional concerns will also be given their due weight. The application of love, forgiveness and grace will also be discussed.

LEXICAL AND GRAMMATICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 use the word πορνεία (*porneia*) in the so-called exception clauses. In light of the way this word is used throughout the New Testament, it appears to be distinct from μοιχεία (*moicheia*), the normal word for adultery.⁵ According to H. Reisser, words from the *pornē* group generally stand for the Hebrew *zānāh* which means to prostitute oneself or to fornicate. In later Jewish rabbinical language, זְנוּת (*z'nut* (Gk. *porneia*) included not only prostitution and extra-marital sexual intercourse, but also incest and all kinds of unnatural sexual intercourse.⁶ Thus, the entire semantic range of πορνεία (*porneia*) should be kept in

mind when considering what may or may not be valid grounds for divorce and remarriage. It may be that these verses are not merely referring just to adultery, but rather, to a much more serious and possibly habitual sexual perversion.

Grammatically, the most interesting elements are the so-called “exception clauses” (Matt 5:32, *περεκτος̄ λόγου πορνείας*, *parektos logou porneias*; Matt 19:9, *μη̄ ἐπῑ πορνείᾳ*, *mē̄ epī porneia*). It is generally agreed that both these clauses have a related meaning, but what exactly do they mean? Are they real exceptions?

Matthew 19:9⁷

T. R. Edgar claims “The grammar and syntax of the verse are simple and not at all unusual.”⁸ But Gordon Wenham has pointed out that the grammatical structure of the protasis (i.e. verb clause + negated phrase + verb clause) is unparalleled in the Gospels.⁹ Indeed, the grammars do not discuss this kind of construction.¹⁰

Although the vast majority of interpreters do in fact take *μη̄ ἐπῑ πορνείᾳ* as a true exception,¹¹ the grammatical basis for this conclusion is not at all watertight. *μη̄* (*mē̄*) by itself is never translated as “except” anywhere in the New Testament.¹² Because of this, Max Zerwick suggests an ellipsis of *ἐὰν* (*ean*), which when combined with *μη̄* (i.e. *ἐὰν μη̄ ἐπῑ πορνείᾳ*) can be translated as “except” or “unless.”¹³ However, ellipsis only occurs when the same word is used elsewhere in the immediate context¹⁴ (except for copulative verbs), but *ἐὰν* (or *εἰ*) is not present at all in the immediate context. If there is an ellipsis, it would have to be of *ὅς ἂν* (*hos an*), resulting in *ὅς ἂν μη̄*, but such a construction is never used to communicate anything like an exception in the New Testament.¹⁵ In order to solve this problem, Zerwick argues that

ὅς ἄν means the same as ἔάν. While it is true that, normally, ὅς ἄν is semantically equivalent to a third class condition,¹⁶ it is obviously formally quite different, and in idiomatic expressions like ἔάν μὴ, it is the usage of *particular* words which define the idiom, and give it meaning. In other words, since the occurrence of the words ἔάν μὴ together form an idiom for “except,” the absence of these particular words means the absence of that particular idiom. Therefore, grammatically, it is highly unlikely that μὴ in 19:9 indicates an exception clause.

It could also be argued that μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ should simply be rendered literally as “not on the basis of sexual sin” and would, therefore, imply that sexual sin is valid grounds for divorce and remarriage. However, μὴ does not inherently mean “not,” but rather serves as a negative particle.¹⁷ It is generally rendered as “not” when it negates a verb, but the phrase μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ contains no explicit verb. In order to determine how μὴ should be rendered in this context, we must first determine what the author intended to negate when he wrote these words.

The object of grammatical analysis is to determine the semantic *possibilities*¹⁸ and there *are* other possibilities—possibilities that appear to fit the context much better than the conventional view which holds that μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is an exception clause.

In a 1954 paper, Bruce Vawter argued for what has become known as the *preteritive view*. This view sees the Matthean exception clauses as exceptions to the actual proposition (i.e. the possibility of divorce for sexual sin), rather than to the verb “divorce.”¹⁹ Although I do not accept the details of Vawter’s argument²⁰ I believe his

basic premise that the exception applies to the actual proposition of divorce and remarriage for sexual sin is worthy of some further consideration.

The grammatical relationship of the “exception” clause to the rest of the protasis is the key to determining its meaning. Blomberg argues that if the writer wanted to be understood as saying that all remarriage is wrong even if it comes after divorce for adultery, he would have used two distinct clauses—that is, a general clause to forbid all remarriage and a specific clause to forbid remarriage after divorce for sexual sin.²¹ Indeed, this is similar to what the present author proposes. It is possible to understand μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ as a *parenthetical clause*.²² In other words, it is not actually part of the protasis, but an aside or annotation in the text, similar to that found in John 14:22.²³ Furthermore, this parenthetical clause is not an exception, but Matthew’s editorial addition which actually functions as an explicit *prohibition* against divorce for sexual sin. In other words, Matthew has added an annotation in the form of a parenthetical clause in order to make explicit what was already implicit in Jesus’ teaching.

Given this proposition, there are two ways to understand these clauses: (1) Instead of assuming an ellipsis of ἐάν which is not found anywhere in the immediate context, it would be more appropriate to assume an ellipsis of the third person singular aorist subjunctive verb ἀπολύσῃ (*apolusē*) mentioned in the preceding clause. Indeed, when μὴ is used with the aorist subjunctive, it often denotes a prohibition.²⁴ Therefore, 19:9 may be translated as follows:

I tell you that any man who divorces his wife, (he may not divorce for sexual sin), and marries another woman commits adultery.

(2) Even if the ellipsis of ἀπολύση was not a possibility, the negated phrase ἐπὶ πορνεία would still convey a similar meaning. The phrase ἐπὶ πορνεία communicates the possibility of divorce “on the basis of sexual sin,” which is then negated by μὴ. In other words, the possibility of divorce on the basis of sexual sin is being denied. This could be rendered as follows:

I tell you that any man who divorces his wife, (divorce on the basis of sexual sin is not allowed), and marries another woman commits adultery.

In addition, the position of μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία also presents a problem if it is taken as an exception. Since the clause comes after “...anyone who divorces his wife...” but before “...and marries another...,” it appears to be structurally associated only with the *divorce* half of the double conditional sentence. While Edgar simply dismisses this as insignificant,²⁵ Blomberg claims the position of the clause is the most unambiguous because if it followed both ὅς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ (hos an apolusē tēn gunaika autou, “whoever divorces his wife”) and καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην (kai gamēsē allēn, “and marries another”), then it would imply sexual sin was the cause of both the divorce and the remarriage.²⁶ However, a person who divorces their spouse and does not remarry may be sinning, but they are not committing adultery. Put differently, if a person divorces their spouse, but does not engage in sexual relations with another person, they have not actually committed adultery. Thus, divorce and remarriage *should* be taken together in this context.

Nevertheless, Blomberg also cites the following English sentence as an instance of where an exception sandwiched between two verbs modifies them both:

Anyone who kills a dog, unless the animal is diseased, and buries it in his garden, shall be fined by the city council.²⁷

But given this statement alone, and assuming it forms a biconditional, we can only derive the following propositions:

1. Anyone who kills a dog that *is not diseased* and buries it in their garden, *shall be fined* by the city council.
2. Anyone who kills a dog that *is diseased* and buries it in their garden, *shall not be fined* by the city council.

Clearly, the incursion of a fine is dependent on whether the animal is diseased or not. Thus, the exception *only* applies to the killing of the dog, or in the case of Matthew 19:9, the divorcing of one's wife.²⁸ Therefore, even if μή ἐπί πορνείᾳ is a real exception it would only apply to divorce, not to remarriage.²⁹ In other words, it may be permissible for a man to divorce his wife on the grounds of sexual sin, but this would not mean or imply that he could legitimately remarry.

Matthew 5:32

The “exception” of Matthew 5:32 begins with παρεκτός (*parektos*). Unlike μή, παρεκτός, when used as an improper preposition with the genitive, can be translated as “except.”³⁰ Thus, Matthew 5:32 appears to contain a real exception. But to what exactly does the exception refer? The whole verse reads: “but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (NASB).

Does this verse imply that a person may divorce on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness and remarry without committing adultery? In order to correctly

understand the implications of this verse it is helpful to restate its propositions in a clearer form:

1. Anyone who divorces his wife for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress.
2. Anyone who divorces his wife for marital unfaithfulness, does not cause her to become an adulteress.
3. Any man who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Proposition (1) clearly states that the practice of divorcing one's wife has the ultimate effect of turning her into an adulterer, given that she would inevitably remarry.³¹ Proposition (2), on the other hand, states that if a man divorces his wife because she has committed adultery, then he would *not cause her to become an adulteress* because she would *already be an adulteress!* Thus, her moral status would not change if she married again. This is the reason why Matthew specifies an exception at this point. If the exception was not present, Matthew's statement that the divorced woman would subsequently be made into an adulterer given that she would inevitably remarry, becomes superfluous because her adultery was the reason for the divorce in the first place.

Moreover, the second conjunctive clause in 5:32 ("...and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery"), is grammatically independent of the exception (proposition (3)), and states that a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery, regardless of the reason for her being divorced. This implies that any man who marries a faithful but divorced woman (i.e. a woman who was divorced for any reason other than marital unfaithfulness) commits adultery. Therefore, if Matthew 5:32 teaches that marital unfaithfulness is valid grounds for divorce, then it also teaches that

a faithful but divorced woman who remarries, *does not* commit adultery, even though the man who marries her *does!*³² This is clearly absurd, and seriously calls into question the understanding that marital unfaithfulness is valid grounds for divorce.

It appears, then, that Jesus and Matthew are telling their respective audiences that, contrary to Moses' concession, (1) a faithful but divorced woman will be made into an adulterer because she will inevitably remarry in order to survive; (2) a woman divorced because of marital unfaithfulness will not become an adulterer if she remarries, because she would already be an adulterer; and (3) any man who marries a divorced woman is committing adultery, regardless of the reason for the divorce. Donald Hagner concludes: "This viewpoint presupposes the permanent character of the marriage bond. For Jesus, not even divorce can change that fact."³³

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Although the grammar in Matthew 19:9 is not entirely clear, the strongest evidence against it (and 5:32) presenting a valid case for divorce and remarriage, comes from an examination of the historical and literary context.

Jewish Social and Historical Factors

In Matthew 19:9, Jesus was responding to the religious leader's question about why Moses commanded that a certificate be given to a divorced woman. This command is given in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and specifies a case law relating to the handling of a woman who had been divorced and remarried, and who's second husband had either divorced her or died. The meaning of this passage had been hotly debated among the Rabbis, and at the time of Christ, two main schools of thought had emerged: (1) The

school of Shammai taught that if a man discovered some (sexual) indiscretion concerning his wife he must divorce her. (2) The school of Hillel taught that if a man simply disliked his wife for any reason, he could divorce her.³⁴ It appears the Shammaites emphasized the “something indecent” (עֲרֻוַּת דְּבָרָה, ‘*ērṵwāt dābār*) of verse 1, while the Hillelites emphasized the “dislike” (וְשִׂנְאָה, *ûsnē’ah*) of verse 3.³⁵

L. O. Richards posits that although God did not command divorce, he permitted it.³⁶ But this view simply does not square with a God who hates divorce (Mal 2:16). It is not that God actively permitted divorce, but that He allowed it to happen, in the same way that He allowed other sinful deeds to occur. Just as polygamy is not part of God’s intention for Man, neither is divorce, yet both were tolerated in the Old Testament.

Edgar argues that since divorce and remarriage are presupposed in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, and since Paul calls the Law holy, righteous and good (Rom 7:12), then divorce and remarriage are allowed in certain circumstances.³⁷ But “the law” in Romans 7:12 refers to the decalogue,³⁸ not to the many case laws stipulated by Moses, of which Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is a part. It should also be noted that this case law does not actually explicitly permit divorce and remarriage. The *reality* of divorce is assumed, not its validity. This is in line with Jesus’ comments regarding Moses’ instruction on divorce in Matthew 19:8: Moses allowed divorce because of hard-heartedness. Thus, the purpose of this case law is to prohibit a man from remarrying a woman he had previously divorced, and who had subsequently married another man.

Furthermore, note that verse 4 states “*then* her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an

abomination before the LORD , and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance” (NASB). The clause “after she has been defiled” suggests that the reason why the first husband may not remarry her is because she has been defiled as a result of her marriage to the second husband. In other words, the divorced woman’s marriage to the second husband was adulterous, but was tolerated because of the people’s hard-heartedness (cf. Matt 19:8).

Dale Allison argues for marital unfaithfulness as valid grounds for divorce and remarriage by pointing to the account of Joseph in Matthew 1:18-25. Joseph considered divorcing Mary when he found out she was pregnant, yet he was also described as a righteous man (v. 19). Therefore, it would appear that divorcing for adultery was justified.³⁹ However, it should be noted that Joseph and Mary were not actually married at this time. Although the Jewish betrothal was more binding than our modern engagement period, the “divorce” would not dissolve the marriage because there was none to dissolve!⁴⁰ Donald Hagner suggests that the best solution is to take the two clauses of verse 19 as forming a tension between Joseph’s obligation to follow the Law (which at this time, *commanded* him to expose Mary to public disgrace and possibly stoning) and his own desires. He suggests the translation: “Joseph...being a righteous man, yet not wanting to disgrace her publicly,...”⁴¹ It should also be noted, as Heth has pointed out, that the possibility of remarriage is not mentioned in the Joseph story.⁴²

Matthew 19:3-12

Matthew makes it clear the Pharisees were not merely seeking Jesus’ opinion on the legality of divorce, but were actually testing Him. In light of the current Rabbinical

debate, it appears they were trying to force Him into taking sides.⁴³ In verse 3 κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν (kata pasan aitian) can be taken as “for every reason whatever” (i.e. Hillel’s position) or “for any reason at all” but the context suggests the first alternative.⁴⁴

As was His custom, Jesus did not answer their question directly, but appeals to Genesis 2:24, in order to deny the presupposition on which their question is based: that divorce is permissible in some circumstances. Jesus’ response could not have been more clear, or more absolute:⁴⁵ His answer is an emphatic ‘No.’ God specifically created men and women for each other, and it had always been His intention, right from the beginning, for married couples to stay together. Divorce is completely contrary to His will.

In response to this point, Edgar argues that since God’s pronouncement in Genesis 2:24 is pre-fall, it is not His final word on the issue, since it does not take into account the change in Man.⁴⁶ However, it is impossible to conceive of how the Fall of Man would force God to alter the definition of sin or to lower His own standard.

Edgar also considers Jesus’ pronouncement “What God has joined together, let no man separate” (Matt 19:6) as an indication that marriage can be broken.⁴⁷ But this is a moot point. While there is no doubt that marriage can be broken, Jesus makes it clear that such a breakdown is contrary to God’s will.

After having their loaded question summarily dealt with, the Pharisees queried Jesus on his understanding of Moses’ “command” in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Immediately,

Jesus corrects them by pointing out that Moses only permitted divorce—he did not command it. Blomberg notes that Jesus did not argue that the laws of Moses were not from God,⁴⁸ but He does state that it was *Moses* who permitted divorce, rather than God Himself. Jesus' response (v. 8) again shows that divorce is contrary to God's will. Moses allowed divorce because of hard-heartedness, but this was not God's original intention. It is in this context that we find the problematic verse 9, which may be understood as including a parenthetical clause inserted by Matthew to specifically *prohibit* divorce and remarriage under any circumstances, including any kind of sexual sin.

Relationship between Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12

Blomberg believes Mark recorded a general statement of gnomic truth, which should be understood in the light of Matthew 19:9.⁴⁹ He cites Matthew 16:4 and Mark 8:12 as support: Matthew tells the Pharisees and Sadducees that no sign will be given to them, except the sign of Jonah, whereas Mark simply states that no sign will be given. Similarly, Craig Keener and Robert Stein view Mark 10:11 as an exaggeration for effect, although Stein also cautions against taking a command as an overstatement simply because it is unpalatable.⁵⁰

However, such views are problematic for two reasons: (1) The differences between Matthew 16:4 and Mark 8:12 are not comparable with the differences between Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:12. Matthew's reference to the sign of Jonah is clearly redactional, but it makes little difference to the meaning and implications of the text. His inclusion of an exception in Matthew 19:9, on the other hand, would radically alter Jesus' overall teaching on this subject. (2) The fact that Mark (and Luke) would have

been read independently of Matthew seems to have been overlooked. Thus, a person who only had access to Mark and/or Luke would most certainly get the wrong idea. Such circumstances would certainly not have been uncommon, given that Matthew was written primarily to Jews, whereas Mark and Luke were written primarily to Gentiles. Thus, many Gentile Christians would never have read Matthew.

There are also significant differences between the Matthean and Markan accounts, and it is surprising how often they are missed. For example, Robert Stein states that in both accounts, the Pharisees were the audience.⁵¹ But a closer examination of both accounts reveals that this is not so. While Jesus made the pronouncement in Matthew 19:9 to the Pharisees, Mark 10:10 makes it clear that He and His disciples had retreated to the house before making the pronouncement in Mark 10:11-12.

The format of the dialog in both accounts is also quite different. In Matthew, Jesus argues from Genesis 2:24 before He deals with Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but in Mark the reverse occurs.⁵² In addition, Mark states that a woman who divorces and remarries also commits adultery. While some of these changes may be attributed to the different redactional concerns of each author, it appears that these two accounts are not exactly parallel, and there is strong evidence to suggest that Matthew 19:9 and Mark 10:12 record two separate pronouncements: one made in public to the Pharisees and the other made in private to the disciples a short time later.⁵³ Thus, if Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 19:9 is an *absolute* statement about the wrongness of divorce and remarriage, then it is not surprising that the disciples were shocked at His words (Matt 19:10), nor is it surprising that they asked Jesus again about the issue in private (Mark 10:10).

Matthew 5:31-32 (and Luke 16:18)

There is no doubt that Jesus would have taught the same things on multiple occasions, and it appears that Matthew 5:31-32 and Luke 16:18 record such occasion(s).

As opposed to the polemical dialogue of 19:3-12, Matthew 5:31-32 is a more formal didactic pronouncement. It is located in a series of pronouncements⁵⁴ in which Jesus points out that there is more to keeping the Law than slavishly following it according to the letter. In each pronouncement He goes far beyond what the Law actually said in order to highlight its full meaning and implications. In the case of 5:31-32, Jesus points out the wrongness of the current teaching on divorce. If a husband sought to obey the Law by giving his wife a certificate of divorce when he discovered some sexual indiscretion (Deut 24:1-4), he was completely missing the point, because divorce is totally contrary to God's will and He hates it (Mal 2:16). Indeed, Hagner notes that the call of the Kingdom is a call to the ethics of the perfect will of God, which makes no provision for, or concession to, the weakness of the flesh.⁵⁵ He goes on to point out that this teaching is quite in line with such ethics (cf. Matt 5:48).⁵⁶

It is unclear whether Luke 16:18 is a parallel account of Matthew 5:31-32, since it appears completely disconnected from its context. However, the important thing to note is that it also contains no "exception." Again, Edgar claims it should be understood in light of Matthew 19:9,⁵⁷ but as with Mark, Luke would have been read independently of Matthew. If Luke thoroughly investigated and faithfully recorded Christ's teaching as he himself claims (Luke 1:1-3), then why did he leave out the "exception," especially since it would make a significant difference to Jesus' teaching

on this subject? The simplest and most reasonable explanation is that Jesus never uttered any such exception.

1 Corinthians 7:10-11, 39

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul commands the married to stay married and not to divorce or separate. Paul gives no exception to this rule and therefore appears to agree with Mark and Luke. In addition, Paul goes even further by *explicitly forbidding* remarriage for those who do happen to divorce or separate (v. 11).

However, Blomberg simply dismisses this passage in the same way he dismisses the exceptionless statements of Mark and Luke: Paul was simply making a general statement, which should be understood in the light of Matthew 19:9.⁵⁸ But again, it is unlikely the Gentile Corinthian Christians would have read Matthew's gospel, which was written primarily to Jews. Blomberg also claims that this passage is not directly parallel to Matthew 19:9 because it concerns a woman leaving her husband.⁵⁹ This is a surprising comment considering verse 11 clearly prohibits husbands divorcing their wives.

Furthermore, in verse 39 Paul states that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, which implies that marriage may only be dissolved by the death of a spouse. In this case, Paul *explicitly* gives permission for such people to remarry. It is important to note that in no other circumstance is such a permission ever given. Gordon Fee comments:

The first statement, 'A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives,' runs so counter to Jewish understanding and practice at this point in history that it almost certainly reflects

Paul's understanding of Jesus' own instructions. As such it is a final word against divorce and remarriage.⁶⁰

Implications of an Exception

Wenham argues that if an exception is present in Matthew 19:9 then Jesus would have been agreeing with the Shammaite view of divorce which he had just condemned.⁶¹ However, Blomberg responds by pointing out that Jesus *did* go beyond the teaching of Shammai in that Jesus only *permitted* divorce for sexual sin, whereas Shammai *commanded* it.⁶² But the context makes it clear that Jesus was responding to *Moses'* teaching (see vv. 7-8) not Shammai's. This means that an exception would imply that Jesus was actually agreeing with Moses' teaching in Deuteronomy 24, which is not possible, considering His response in verse 8. Jesus pointed out that Moses allowed divorce and remarriage because of hard-heartedness, but this was not God's original intention. Therefore, in verses 8b-9, Jesus actually over-turns Moses' concession.⁶³

Furthermore, the problem of agreement with Moses is accentuated by the form and function of the pronouncements in Matthew 5. Each pronouncement begins "You have heard..." and outlines either what the Old Testament says or what the current Jewish teaching was on the subject in question. It then proceeds to a contrasting "...but I tell you..." in which Jesus goes far beyond the current teaching on the requirements of the Law, and instead calls for a much higher moral standard. Again, this would explain why the disciples reacted as they did in Matthew 19:10.

An exception in Matthew 19:9 would also result in a contradiction with 19:4-8. Jesus would firstly be emphasizing the absolute permanence of marriage, and then follow by

stating the possibility of dissolution by divorce for sexual sin! Blomberg admits this is an “apparent contradiction,” but affirms that speakers and writers regularly proceed in this way and cites John 4:1-3 as an example.⁶⁴ However, this example is not at all like the situation in Matthew 19. Unlike permanence and dissolution, passing through Samaria is not a mutually exclusive activity in relation to travelling to Judea. Therefore, the contradiction remains.

In addition, since Jesus equates lust with adultery in Matthew 5:27-28, the possibility of divorce for adultery leads to the ridiculous situation where a wife may legitimately divorce her husband for having lustful thoughts!

Furthermore, Jesus states that Moses permitted divorce because of “hard-heartedness.” This term refers to obstinate rejection of God’s will (Psalm 95:8; 2 Chron 36:13).⁶⁵ It clearly describes a sinful attitude. Indeed, Blomberg comments: “Christians too can divorce because of hard-heartedness, but they sin when they do.”⁶⁶ Therefore, since divorce, regardless of the reason, is against God’s will and cannot be called anything other than sin. If divorce (and remarriage) is permitted in certain circumstances, then this implies *it is acceptable to sin in certain circumstances*—a proposition that is completely at odds with the holiness and righteousness of God. As Ward Powers comments:

To say that divorce and remarriage are contrary to the will of God, and therefore sin, unless a spouse commits adultery first of all, is to say that the committing of one sin (the adultery) will prevent something else (the divorce and remarriage) being sinful. This is a very curious type of teaching to attribute to Christ.⁶⁷

In addition, if Jesus and Paul *did* teach exceptions then one could argue for other reasons not mentioned.⁶⁸ Where does it end? This could be (and often is) used as a loophole for those desiring to get out of an unhappy marriage.

MATTHEW'S REDACTIONAL CONCERNS

The standard redaction critical view of Matthew sees the author as making minor modifications to Mark's account,⁶⁹ including the addition of the "exceptions." Given the absolute nature of Mark 10:12 and Luke 16:18, and the fact that the exceptions would essentially nullify the antithesis, it is unlikely they were actually uttered by Jesus.⁷⁰ In addition, Matthew was a Jew writing for a Jewish Christian audience, so it makes good sense that he alone would add an explicit prohibition against divorce for sexual sin in 19:9, since only the Jews would have been aware of Moses' permission in Deuteronomy, and the Rabbinical dispute between Hillel and Shammai, along with their teachings.

Although the content of Matthew and Mark is similar, it is not the same, and even a casual glance at a Greek synopsis⁷¹ reveals that both the wording and structure are quite different. Therefore it is more likely that, for this pericope, Matthew and Mark used some other common source. It should also be noted that since Matthew was one of the twelve, it is highly likely he was an eye-witness to this dialogue and may well have drawn from his own memory.⁷²

Blomberg, on the other hand, rejects the notion of the "exception" being a redactional addition. Rather, he considers it to be an original element left out by Mark and restored by Matthew.⁷³ But in addition to the problems of such a view which I have already

outlined above, this also prompts the question of *why* Mark (and Luke) chose to leave it out. If μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία is a real exception, then it is a significant and important piece of information, not just some minor point which would not have interested the audiences of Mark and Luke. Furthermore, such a view would also imply that only Matthew faithfully recorded Jesus' teaching.

At the other extreme, Edgar rejects all redactional views, but his comment "...modern redaction-criticism...turns the Gospel authors into mere editors rather than accurate eyewitnesses"⁷⁴ is misleading, and indicates that he has failed to fully appreciate the nature and importance of redaction criticism from an evangelical perspective.⁷⁵

In order to understand the uniqueness of Matthew's record of Jesus' teaching, the entire gospel should be examined as a unit in order to find key elements that may inform us of his historical cultural context and his purpose for writing. As suggested in the grammatical discussion, the so-called "exception" of Matthew 19:9 is more likely a prohibition, which Matthew has inserted to explicitly contradict the Pharisees' teaching. Indeed, all throughout his gospel there is a strong theme of polemic against the religious leaders⁷⁶ and he consistently goes out of his way to highlight how wrong they were.⁷⁷ This is not surprising in light of the fact that (1) Matthew's original audience were most likely Jewish Christians,⁷⁸ and (2) Matthew was formerly a tax collector and would have been despised and looked down upon by the religious leaders. Indeed, this polemic against Pharisaic teaching is most evident in Matthew 5, where Jesus repeatedly summarizes a particular teaching of the day (one of which is divorce for sexual sin) and then calls His listeners to go beyond that teaching, in order to meet the supreme righteousness that God demands (cf. 5:48).

GRACE, FORGIVENESS, AND THE SINGLE LIFE

Many appeal to God's grace and forgiveness in order to justify divorce and remarriage.⁷⁹ Blomberg writes:

A realistic Christian ethic...recognizes that believers must often choose to do less than God's ideal. But in so doing they do not sin and may therefore be said to have made a correct or legitimate choice.⁸⁰

But why "must" Christians choose to do less than God's ideal? And how can this not be regarded as sin? Did not Christ exhort us to "Be perfect" (Matt 5:48)? Moreover, divorcees who appeal to the principle of grace in order to justify their divorce and remarriage are at risk of maintaining double standards. In many cases, 'innocent' parties of a broken marriage were unwilling to show grace and offer forgiveness to their unfaithful spouse.

There is no denying that God is gracious, but this never implies that He lowers his standards or accommodates Himself to man's sinfulness, nor does it give license to go on sinning (Rom 6:1-2). There is no denying that God forgives (even those who divorce), but again, forgiveness does not give license to sin (John 8:11), which is what remarriage after divorce would entail.

God is not just gracious and forgiving, He is also just, and His justice demands that He respect the choices of people even if those choices are foolish and sinful. Despite God's forgiveness, past sins often have lasting and tragic consequences. In the case of divorce, one of these consequences is the exclusion of the possibility of remarriage. Geoffrey Bromiley is quite correct in pointing out that Christians

...must be ready to obey God and not remarry after separation even though they might plead, as they often do, that they have a right to happiness or to fulfilment of natural desires. To talk of a right to happiness is to delude oneself. Happiness, when it is attained, is a gift from God and it cannot be attained, nor can human life be fulfilled, where there is conflict with God's stated will or a defiant refusal to see that true happiness and fulfilment lie only in a primary commitment to God's kingdom and righteousness.⁸¹

Yet Keener believes the "innocent" victim of divorce should not be punished with celibacy.⁸² However, this assumes that (1) there is an innocent party, and (2) that celibacy is punishment. While in most cases one partner may be more at fault than the other, it is hard to imagine an instance where one partner has not contributed in some way to the breakdown of the marriage,⁸³ and to consider celibacy a punishment goes right against Scripture since both Jesus and Paul speak of it favorably (Matt 19:11-12, 1 Cor 7:8, 32).⁸⁴ Moreover, are we to understand that God is punishing the many single Christians around the world who desire to be married but have as yet been unable to find a life partner?⁸⁵ William Heth insightfully comments:

...the statement 'to punish the innocent party with celibacy' does say something about one's theology of singleness...But if marriage is 'for life,' and the remarriage of even innocent spouses is adultery, might not Jesus call his disciples to a 'suffering for the sake of doing right?' And would not Jesus call this 'obedience' and 'honouring God,' not punishment?⁸⁶

Although Blomberg claims no New Testament text rescinds the permission to remarry in the case of a legitimate divorce,⁸⁷ he is assuming there is such a thing as a legitimate divorce. The present author has argued that there are no such circumstances. In any case, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 does indeed explicitly forbid all remarriage.

It should be noted, however, that although divorce is disallowed by God, it will inevitably happen and civil law makes it very easy. In the case of an abusive marriage, legal divorce may be necessary and prudent in order to ensure the safety of one partner and/or children. In the case of desertion, divorce may be mandated by civil law. However, these situations are exceptional and it may be necessary to permit divorce in order to make the best of a bad situation (e.g. where physical violence is involved). Nevertheless, such circumstances should never be taken as a license to remarry.

CONCLUSION

As Heth wisely notes, our theology of marriage should be committed to the premise that true happiness and fulfilment can only be found by putting God's kingdom and His righteousness above all else (Matt 6:33).⁸⁸

Because divorce is so clearly contra to the will of God, and because divorce for sexual sin displays an attitude of unforgiveness, the very notion of a legitimate divorce in certain circumstances seems unthinkable. Add to this the historical and literary context in which these so-called 'exceptions' occur, and the probability that they indicate legitimate grounds for divorce and remarriage approaches zero.

It appears, then, that marriage is dissolved only upon the death of a spouse and therefore, divorce and remarriage for whatever reason, including sexual sin, is prohibited because it violates God's plan and (at least at that time and in that culture) it would inevitably lead to adultery.

Admittedly, the position argued above is vulnerable to being labeled as ‘hard-line’, ‘graceless,’ or ‘unloving.’⁸⁹ Yet it is difficult to see why a call for permanence in marriage—which is what God had intended from the beginning—should be so labeled. Nevertheless, failed marriages do occur and Christians do remarry—sometimes out of ignorance, and sometimes out of willful disobedience. Sometimes there are unfortunate circumstances; the death of a child; debilitating illness or injury; mental illness; domestic violence—all of which may place unbearable strain on the marriage. Yet, in all these circumstances there should be forgiveness, love and acceptance for those who divorce and remarry.

In the final analysis, the key issue in this discussion is highlighted by Robert Stein:

*Divorce, for whatever the cause, witnesses to a failure somewhere of what God originally ordained for his creation...To contemplate divorce and in what instances a divorce may be legitimate is to think very differently from the way in which Jesus thought.*⁹⁰

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr William Heth of Taylor University for commenting on an early draft of this paper. Nevertheless, the views expressed are my own and so are any errors.

¹ C. L. Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12”, *TrinJ* 11 (1990) 161.

² Of course, none of these are inherently bad. Indeed, they often shed a great deal of light on the passage in question, but they must not be given undue weight. They should be used to illuminate the path not drive the vehicle.

³ S. E. Porter and P. Buchanan, “On the Logical Structure of Matt 19:9”, *JETS* 34 (1991) 339. However, calling the application of logic “useless,” is surely an overstatement. Logic is a tool, and if it is applied properly, it can be highly profitable.

⁴ W. A. Heth, “Another Look at the Erasmian View of Divorce and Remarriage”, *JETS* 25 (1982) 264. An unbelieving spouse deserting their believing partner, is also presented as a case where divorce and remarriage may be permitted, but this exception is based on 1 Cor 7:15.

⁵ Cf. the list of sins in Matt 15:19 includes both words implying they are distinct.

⁶ H. Reisser, “πορνείω” *NIDNTT* 1.498-499. See also Louw-Nida: “to engage in sexual immorality of any kind, often with the implication of prostitution.” BAGD: “prostitution, unchastity, fornication, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse.” This word appears to be the rendering of the Hebrew עֲרֵוֹת דְּבָרָה in Deut 24:1. Note also that, in John 8:41, the religious leaders state that they are ἐκ πορνείας οὐ γεγεννημέθα (“not born of sexual immorality”).

⁷ Michael Holmes has shown the text of Matt 19:9 should also include the phrase “καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσας μοιχᾶται” (“The Text of the Matthean Divorce Passages: A Comment on the Appeal to Harmonization in Textual Decisions”, *JBL* 109 (1990) 663-664).

⁸ T. R. Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion”, in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (ed. H. Wayne House, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990) 156.

⁹ Nor is it found anywhere else in the New Testament or even the LXX.

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- ¹⁰ G. J. Wenham, “The Syntax of Matthew 19:9”, *JSNT* 28 (1986) 17.
- ¹¹ Blomberg, 173. This conclusion is often simply asserted and not argued.
- ¹² Although BAGD cite Matt 19:9 as an example where μή is rendered as “except” they have clearly stepped outside lexicography into grammar.
- ¹³ M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 148-149. Wenham, “The Syntax of Matthew 19:9” 17.
- ¹⁴ In Heb 4:10, for example, κατέπαυσεν is missing from the clause beginning with ὡσπερ, but κατέπαυσεν is mentioned in the previous clause.
- ¹⁵ A GRAMCORD search shows that there are five instances of ὅς ἂν μή in the NT, all of which form a negative protasis.
- ¹⁶ D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996) 688-689.
- ¹⁷ μή is rendered as “no reward” in Matt 6:1 and “no bag” in Matt 10:10, and in Matt 5:29 and 5:30 it is not explicitly rendered at all.
- ¹⁸ See W. A. Heth, “Divorce and Remarriage: The Search for an Evangelical Hermeneutic”, *TJ* 16 (1995) 97.
- ¹⁹ B. Vawter, “The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5,32 and 19,9”, *CBQ* 16 (1954) 155-167.
- ²⁰ Indeed, Vawter himself, in a 1977 paper (“Divorce and the New Testament”, *CBQ* 39 [1977] 535, n. 14.), states that he no longer holds this view, although he does not discuss the reason for his change of mind.
- ²¹ Blomberg, 179-180.
- ²² cf. Vawter, “The Divorce Clauses” 164.
- ²³ John 14:22 uses οὐχ rather than μή due to the use of the indicative rather than the subjunctive. See Zerwick, 148.

²⁴ Wallace, 723. For instances of the 3rd person aorist subjunctive acting as a prohibition, see Luke 1:15; 8:12

²⁵ Edgar, 156.

²⁶ Blomberg, 178.

²⁷ Ibid. 179.

²⁸ Phillip Wiebe also attempts to construct an English sentence which grammatically parallels Matt 19:9 (“Jesus’ Divorce Exception”, *JETS* 32 [1989] 329), in order to demonstrate biconditionality: “Whoever exceeds the speed limit, except as authorised by the law, and hits another vehicle, is liable to criminal prosecution.” But the clauses in this sentence contain an unstated mutually exclusive relationship: a person authorized by the law to exceed the speed limit cannot, by definition, be criminally prosecuted! Since no such relationship exists in Matt 19:9, the rest of Wiebe’s argument is completely undermined.

²⁹ This is the position of William Heth and Gordon Wenham.

³⁰ BAGD “παρεκτὸς”

³¹ D. A. Hagner (*Matthew 1-13*, WBC [Dallas, Texas: Word, 1993] 125) points out: “The husband who divorces his wife causes her to commit adultery because in the culture of that day, unlike ours, a single woman could hardly survive on her own, except through prostitution. She was therefore bound to take another husband and so be made into an adulteress.”

³² J. C. Laney, “Paul and the Permanence of Marriage in 1 Corinthians 7”, *JETS* 25 (1982) 294. See also Wenham, “Matthew and Divorce: An Old Crux Revisited” 96.

³³ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 125.

³⁴ See Blomberg, 164.

³⁵ Note also that the Jews did not consider a married man who had sexual relations with an unmarried woman to be committing adultery, but a married woman who had sexual relations with anyone other than her husband *was* committing adultery (Wenham, “Matthew and Divorce” 96).

³⁶ L. O. Richards, “Response to J Carl Laney”, in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (ed. H. Wayne House, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990) 68.

³⁷ T. R. Edgar, “Response to William Heth”, in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (ed. H. Wayne House, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990) 138.

³⁸ The citation of Ex 20:17 (“Do not covet”) in Rom 7:7 suggests that “the law” in this context refers to the decalogue.

³⁹ D. C. Allison, “Divorce, Celibacy and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25 and Matthew 19:1-12)”, *JSNT* 49 (1993) 4-5.

⁴⁰ Indeed, Jesus’ quotation of Gen 2:24 in Matt 19:5-6 could hardly be applied to Joseph and Mary.

⁴¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 18.

⁴² Heth, “Divorce and Remarriage” 79.

⁴³ No doubt there were plenty of Shammaites and Hillelites standing by ready to respond.

⁴⁴ D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, WBC (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1994) 547.

⁴⁵ Hagner (125) agrees: “The attitude of Jesus in 19:6...is absolute”

⁴⁶ Edgar, “Response to William Heth”, 139.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 137.

⁴⁸ Blomberg, 171.

⁴⁹ Blomberg, 162. Also Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion”, 153.

⁵⁰ R. H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 10, and "Is it Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" 119.

⁵¹ R. H. Stein, "Is it Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" *JETS* 22 (1979) 116.

⁵² When Jesus asks "What did Moses command you?" in Mark 10:3, He probably had in mind Gen 2:24, rather than Deut 24:1-4, since Deut 24:1-4 is only a case law stating a prohibition.

⁵³ Edgar also seems to overlook this. ("Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion", 168).

⁵⁴ Regarding murder (5:21-22), insults (5:23), adultery (5:27-28), divorce (5:31-32), oaths (5:33-37), revenge (5:38-42), and love (5:43-47).

⁵⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 549.

⁵⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 125. However, he only considers it an ideal to strive after.

⁵⁷ Edgar, "Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion" 153.

⁵⁸ Blomberg, 178.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987) 355.

⁶¹ Wenham, "The Syntax of Matthew 19:9" 17.

⁶² Blomberg, 178. He also claims that Shammai did not teach that men could also commit adultery against their wives, but such may be implied given that Shammai denied divorce unless there was unchastity involved. See the quote on p. 164.

⁶³ Note the adversative particle, δὲ, midway through v. 8 and at the beginning of v. 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 173.

⁶⁵ Richards, "Response to J Carl Laney" 68.

⁶⁶ Blomberg, 172.

⁶⁷ B. Ward Powers, as cited in *Ibid* 191, n. 126.

⁶⁸ As Keener does.

⁶⁹ Stein, "Is it Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" 117-118.

⁷⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 123.

⁷¹ eg. K. Aland, *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum* (Stuttgart: Wurttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1964).

⁷² This view also avoids the problems of the standard redactional view pointed out by Wenham ("Matthew and Divorce" 97).

⁷³ Blomberg, 163 n. 8.

⁷⁴ Edgar, "Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion" 167.

⁷⁵ See for example G. R. Osborne, "The Evangelical and Redaction Criticism: Critique and Methodology" *JETS* 22 (December 1979) 305-322; "Round Four: The Redaction Debate Continues" *JETS* 28 (December 1985) 399-410.

⁷⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, lix.

⁷⁷ See for example 3:7, 5:20, 9:11-13, 12:1-8, 12:24-37, 12:38-45, 15:1-11, 16:1-6, 16:11-12, 19:3-12, 21:33-45, 22:15-46, and the whole of 23.

⁷⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p lxiv-lxv.

⁷⁹ Richards, "Response to J Carl Laney" 69-70. Also Stein, "Is it Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" 121.

⁸⁰ Blomberg, 182. Note that this contradicts some of his earlier statements. See for example pp. 172, 192.

⁸¹ G. Bromiley, *God and Marriage* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans 1980) 40-41.

⁸² See Heth, "Divorce and Remarriage" 90, and Keener, *...And Marries Another* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991) xii.

⁸³ Even in the case of a once-off act of adultery by an otherwise faithful partner, the innocent party should extend their forgiveness, otherwise he or she would be guilty of hard-heartedness.

⁸⁴ Blomberg admits that most Protestants undervalue celibacy (194). Celibacy is not an impossible or unreasonable option and Heth points to the example of Joseph, Jesus' earthly father (Matt 1:24-25), Joseph the Patriarch (in regard to Potiphar's wife, Gen 39) and David (in regard to Bathsheba, 2 Sam 11) as examples.

⁸⁵ Richards also appears to disparage the single life by making reference to the possibility of being "doomed to a single life.", "Divorce & Remarriage under a Variety of Circumstances", in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (ed. H Wayne House, Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1990) 239.

⁸⁶ Heth, "Divorce and Remarriage" 91. In any case, he also points out the whole issue of determining who is innocent is irrelevant since Jesus was seeking to emphasise the wrongness of all divorce.

⁸⁷ Blomberg, 196.

⁸⁸ Heth, "Divorce and Remarriage" 64.

⁸⁹ Heth also comments that his interpretation (divorce, but no remarriage) has been labelled by many as "unworkable, unloving and unjust." ("Divorce and Remarriage" 99).

⁹⁰ Stein, "Is it Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?" 120-121, my emphasis.