

DIVORCE THEOLOGY TRANSLATION DISASTERS

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Various entrenched translation difficulties and errors have led to some tragic beliefs and practices in the church through the ages. The complex relationships between the various bible passages have led to more than ten different theologies of divorce, all of which claim to be 'the biblical position'! Thankfully, the divergences are almost all the result of poor translations of the passages. It turns out that the OT and NT theologies of divorce are both straightforward, perfectly synchronized and consistent.

However, most readers will recoil from some of the material below because it sounds so 'unbiblical'. This is because our mental models of 'biblical divorce' were actually inherited via translation errors and are not biblical at all. Please do think thrice if you hate this, and be Berean about it (Acts [17:11](#)). We must on no account budge a molecule from the Holy Scriptures, so study hard to prove these claims true or false. Please also note that the translation corrections highlighted below produce a completely coherent and consistent theology of divorce that is sharp and fragrant exactly like the rest of Jesus' teaching. Our standard views of divorce have often led to the perversity of sending abused women and children back to lie with cruel husbands because there was no known adultery. Correction of the translation errors completely frees us from this kind of un-Jesus-like doctrine and practice.

Standard Belief: 'Jesus says that *adultery* is the only grounds for divorce.'

Not truth. In the Greek text (Matt 5, Matt 19, Mark 10) he says '*porneia*' is the only grounds for divorce. In Matt 5 when discussing the sin of lust with the eyes he speaks of '*moichea*' which means *adultery*, but when he switches to discussing divorce the word is '*porneia*' which is far more general and covers *depravity/ sexual immorality/ perversion/ disgracefulness/ disgustingness/ adultery/ degradation* and the like. 'Dirty' words like 'pornography' and 'prostitute' are derived from it. The language was exactly the same in the OT: *adultery* was punishable by death (Leviticus [20:10](#); Deuteronomy [22:22](#)), but divorce was allowed for '*ervath dabhar*' – '*uncleanness*' (Deut 24). Thus both OT and NT always allowed divorce for disgraceful, disgusting, demeaning, sub-human, degrading, depraved behavior. Our wrong theology on this arises solely from translation errors and traditions. Instead of forcing women and children to stay with abusers, addicts and perverts (who had not yet committed adultery), both Moses and Jesus release them from marriage to such men.

Standard Belief: 'Jesus *improves* the slack OT divorce laws that were poor because of the sins of ancient Jews.'

Not truth. In Mark 10 Jesus sounds like he is saying that Moses allowed divorce because of your "hardness of heart" and then offering a new, more

pure doctrine. The “hardness of heart” refers to the wickedness of men who rejected and divorced their wives, but the law about him having to give her a certificate of divorce (Deut 24) was actually a wonderful mercy for these poor women. It gave them exoneration from the accusation of adultery and proved they were free to remarry anyone but that man. Jesus *re-endorses* this law (see previous paragraph and the exact words of Jesus).

Standard Belief: ‘Jesus trumps the OT laws by *replacing* them (“You heard it was said...”) with more serious NT divorce laws (“But I say to you”).

Not truth. Jesus has just said he has come *not* to abolish the OT law but to fulfil it (Matt [5:17](#)). When he said, “It was also said,” Jesus is not quoting the OT at all, but rather Rabbi Akiba, head of one of the two major schools of Jewish theology. His school endorsed the horrible interpretation of Deut 24 that allowed a man to divorce his wife over anything at all - even burnt toast or a prettier woman – as long as the certificate was given. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus crushes a series of such rabbinical teachings by reinstating both the letter and spirit of the OT law.

Standard Belief: ‘God *hates* divorce.’

Not the exact truth. God himself *gave divorce as a mercy for women* for when uncleanness/ depravity/ disgracefulness had entered a marriage and provided protection for the woman so divorced (Deut 24). God himself divorced Israel (Jer 3:8). God himself commanded the whole remnant community to divorce their foreign wives without any reference to or implication of adultery (Ezra 9-10). The idea that ‘God hates divorce’ comes from the old English translation of Malachi [2:16](#) in the 1611 King James Version. The ESV Study Bible describes the Hebrew here as “one of the most difficult passages in the OT to translate,” and they translate it as, “‘For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her’, says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘covers his garment with violence.’” Whichever translation one chooses, God is furious at men (not women – they could not divorce back then) who have contempt for their wives and their vows before God. Reading from v. 14 makes it clear that divorce *per se* was not his concern, it was the faithless and callousness of men who divorce.

Standard Belief: ‘Jesus said a person divorced is committing *adultery* if they remarry.’

Not truth. In the Greek text (Matt [5:32](#), Mark [10:11](#)) the grammar is of a peculiar passive form that cannot be translated into English without adding more words than translators want to use. Jesus is chastising the men of the day (not women) for the way they abused God’s Law in Deut 24 by applying Rabbi Akiba’s doctrine. In Greek the text implies that these wicked men are making it look like their former wives were adulteresses, *not* that they become

adulteresses if they remarry. Some translations now better reflect this (e.g., "But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (NIV 2011)). This text had no direct application to women, let alone to women remarrying, because they had no power whatsoever to respond. Only the very wealthiest of women could get out of the Jewish law and use the Roman law to divorce their husbands.

Standard Belief: 'A woman who divorces must not remarry but must return to her husband.'

Not truth. Paul in 1 Cor [7:10-11](#) wrote, "To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate ('divide' = divorce) from her husband, but *if she does, she should remain unmarried* or else be reconciled to her husband, and the husband should not divorce his wife." Paul knew that Moses and Jesus both sanctioned divorce and remarriage where '*porneia*' has destroyed the marriage. This situation must therefore apply to divorces that occur as a result of high marital conflict, psychological or psychiatric disorders, in-laws wars, etc. apart from '*porneia*'. Such persons must not divide/ divorce-and-remarry. It is remarkable that Paul urges women in such scenarios not to separate *and yet also* allows for separation/ divorce, even implying that this might be sustained indefinitely, so long as they do not marry another. Again, this does not apply to cases where a woman might be free to divorce (because of the husband's '*porneia*') but chooses to separate with a view to gospel-powered reconciliation. Remarkable and wonderful as this is, this route is not and must never be a requirement or obligation from a church because it is not required by Holy Scripture. Christian reconciliation may or may not involve the restoration of the marriage.

God's Final Word: Marriage is pre-Fall, image of God, a sacrament, most grave and holy.

Please recognize the supernatural fusion-infusion implied in Malachi [2:14-15](#) and Song 8:6: "Yahweh was witness between you and the wife of your youth... she is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did He not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth." "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of Yah."