

DIVORCE AND CELIBACY IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	iv
Abstract	viii
List of Abbreviations	ix
Acknowledgements	x
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 Preliminary Observations Of Matthew’s Gospel	2
Main Female Characters	2
Tamar	3
Rahab and Ruth	3
The Wife of Uriah	4
Mary	5
Two More Women Named	7
Independent Women	8
Women & the Resurrection.....	10
Main Male Characters	12
Joseph.....	12
Males Used for Contrasting Reactions.....	14
The Prophets	16
Political Figures	17
The Disciples.....	19
The Kingdom of Heaven	20
Conclusion.....	23
Chapter 2 The Exception Phrase In Matthew 5	25
Understanding Divorce and Remarriage in Ancient Judea	25

The Sermon on the Mount vis à vis Mosaic Law	30
Lust (Matt 5.27-30)	32
Adultery & Divorce.....	34
The Exception Phrase.....	37
Conclusion	40
Chapter 3 Matt 19.1-8	42
Matthew 14.1-12	42
Foreshadowing Christ's suffering	45
Geographical Considerations	47
A Trip to Herod Antipas' Territory.....	47
Hillel and Shammai.....	48
The Importance of Jerusalem	50
The Pharisees' Question.....	50
Quoting the Old Testament	52
Quoting Genesis	52
Deuteronomy's Divorce Certificate	54
Genesis' One Flesh	55
Discourse on עֲרֻת דְּבָרָה	57
Conclusion	61
Chapter 4 Divorce and remarriage in Matt 19.9	63
The Exception Words.....	63
μη ἐπί.....	63
The Greek μοιχᾶται in the present tense	66

Interpretations of Matt 19.9	73
The Text is Ambiguous.....	73
Divorce permitted in cases of adultery, and Joseph was a Righteous Man	74
Divorce and remarriage permitted	76
Divorce permitted because of adultery; remarriage permitted to the innocent party	77
Eschatological Undertones.....	78
A New Ethos	81
Permanency of Marriage.....	82
Conclusion.....	87
Chapter 5 How Should One Translate πορνεία?.....	89
πορνεία’s Definition.....	89
Fornication	91
Incest	92
A Bad Marriage.....	94
Why use πορνεία in Matt 19.9?	95
Conclusion	96
Chapter 6 Matt 19.10-12: To whom does the eunuch refer?	97
Antecedent Verse.....	97
Verse 11 Refers Back to Verse 9	97
Verse 11 Refers Back to Verse 10	99
Verse 11 is an Interpolation	100
Comment.....	100
Interpretations	101

Eunuch is an apologetic for Christ's celibacy	101
Eunuch was a call to radicalisation	102
Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom.....	102
Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom for a time	104
Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom by a divorcé(e)	105
Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom, but not by a divorcé(e)	105
Eunuch referred to gay rights.....	106
Eunuch referred to the Essenes	109
Eunuch referred to gender equality	111
Eunuch Proved That Marriage Is Indissoluble Since He Could Not Marry	114
Eunuch Meant Jesus Was Introducing Divorce As A Sin.....	116
Conclusion	116
Conclusion	118
Appendix Matt 19.13-15.....	121
The Pericope Proves Christ's High-View Of Marriage	122
Conclusion	124
Bibliography	127

ABSTRACT

How are divorcés within the church to live out their post-marital lives? Specifically, how do Matthew's unique statements about exceptions for divorce, and his cryptic comment on eunuchs apply to such people? If Christian divorcés are to live out their faith, the answers to these questions are vital in their next step forward. Since Matt 5.32, 19.9 & 12 are unique to his gospel, an exegesis of Christ's statements on divorce and remarriage must be situated within the gospel rather than by comparing the synoptic gospels. These three verses need to be understood in their context in order to understand what Matthew is saying. Thus, a general overview of the First Gospel is necessary, beginning with the women in Christ's genealogy and the opening narrative about divorce. This will enlighten one's reading of Matthew 5.32 to see how Christ was exonerating his father with his exception phrase. Similarly, the Herodias passage in Matthew 14.1-12 helps readers understand Christ's predicament in 19.1-3 where he was quizzed on divorce in the same area where his cousin was beheaded. Finally, readers will note that eunuchs were never a symbol of celibacy, so Jesus was not forcing divorcés to be celibate. Instead, he was emphatically stating that marriages were to be permanent. This reinforces the universal church's doctrine on marriages, but it shatters the Catholic Church's dogma on the sacrament of marriage and the fate of divorcés.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ACR</i>	<i>Australasian Catholic Record</i>
<i>AJAH</i>	<i>American Journal of Ancient History</i>
<i>AThR</i>	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
<i>BAGD</i>	Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BeO</i>	<i>Bibbia e oriente</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BLE</i>	<i>Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>Chm</i>	<i>Churchman</i>
<i>Colloq</i>	<i>Colloquium</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CTM</i>	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FJ</i>	<i>Fundamentalist Journal</i>
<i>HTS</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Studies</i>
<i>IJNT</i>	<i>An International Journal of Nordic Theology</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Pastoral Psychology</i>
<i>ResQ</i>	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>Scr</i>	<i>Scripture</i>
<i>ScrTh</i>	<i>Scripta Theologica</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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INTRODUCTION

Was Jesus insisting upon perpetual celibacy for the divorced in the Gospel of Matthew? Their fate was important to Matthew since his first narrative in the gospel involved a potential divorce. Matt 19.9 is a key passage to understanding the Christian grounds for divorce. It is one of two passages in Matthew that contains a famous exception phrase. This passage reveals, albeit briefly, Jesus' own exegesis of Gen 2 and Deut 24. Much has been made of this passage throughout Christian history, from Augustine to Cyril to Luther, yet there is no consensus in the Christian church on divorce—from no grounds justifiable at all, to certain grounds justified, including extramarital sex, abandonment, and abuse. Furthermore, there is the enigma of the eunuch passage and whether it entailed celibacy to the never married and the divorced.

Some scholars believe that modern readers ought to look at the meaning of *eunuch* from its Jewish context and its relation to Isa 56.3-4, while others believe that one ought to look at the meaning of the word from a Greek perspective and how it was perceived in its historical context, and still others believe that it was a veiled reference to the Essenes. Understanding this aside from Jesus to his disciples is crucial to understanding Jesus' view of marriage and what it means to be married – and unmarried – for the kingdom of heaven.

This thesis will seek to understand and shed light on Matthew's view of marriage, divorce, and sexual conduct outside of marriage, utilizing often neglected passages in the Gospel. Through the examination of several passages of Matthew's gospel, this thesis will argue that Matthew does not enforce celibacy on divorcés.

CHAPTER 1

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS OF MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

The following preliminary observations will begin with a study of the main characters in Matthew's Gospel, while paying attention to those characters that are named within the gospel. This is to preface a later investigation into the relationship between Matt 1 and 5, and Matt 14 and 19 regarding divorce and remarriage. Conclusions will be drawn from these preliminary observations as to the sexual habits of the Jews perceived by Christ in Matthew, and by Matthew himself, thanks to his usage of dialogue, specific words and names, as well as sequences that he used to foreshadow and recall. Explaining those things that are unique to Mathew's gospel (the exception phrases in 5.32 and 19.9, and the eunuch statement in 19.12) will be achieved by paying attention to the entirety of Matthew's gospel rather than by reading specific pericopes across the synoptics.

Main Female Characters

Matthew's gospel begins with a list of names that traces Christ's genealogy from Abraham through David until Joseph. Matthew usually names only sons and fathers, but there are five women mentioned in his genealogy.¹ All of them were superfluous because their husbands and their sons were named before them. They were named because each one of them called to mind extraordinary circumstances in the Davidic line, four of them in Israel's ancient history, and one of them in Israel's recent, contemporary history. Their

¹ The four gentile women were a rare inclusion in genealogies. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 23.

inclusion in the genealogy can only mean that Matthew wanted to bring special attention to each of their situations.

Tamar

Tamar is the first woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. She was married to Judah's first two sons but was never impregnated by either of them because they were wicked (Gen 38.7, 10). Judah was probably nervous about allowing her to marry his third son for fear that he would suffer the same fate as his two older brothers, so he withheld him from her when the boy was of age to marry (Gen 38.14, 26). To get what was rightfully hers (that is, children and an inheritance), she disguised herself as a prostitute, fooling her father-in-law into impregnating her. She gave birth to twins, thus restoring to her the two men whom she had buried, and to Judah the two boys whom he had lost. The tragedy here is that Judah's great-grandparents suffered from barrenness until well into their 90s, but their great great-grandson chose birth control instead.

Rahab and Ruth

The second woman listed was the actual prostitute, Rahab (Josh 2.1). She was a seductress, which links her with the third woman listed in the genealogy. Ruth would marry Boaz after she seduced him by placing her head at his feet, likely a euphemism for his genitals (Ruth 3.8. מְרִגְלָתִי),² in order to get children and an inheritance (precisely

² For the verse's sexual euphemism, see Shadrac Keita and Janet W Dyk, "The Scene at the Threshing Floor: Suggestive Readings and Intercultural Considerations on Ruth 3," *BT* 57.1 (2006): 17–32, and Charles Halton, "An Indecent Proposal: The Theological Core of the Book of Ruth," *IJNT* 26.1 (2012): 30–43.

what Tamar had been looking for). It is interesting to note that Boaz had Rahab, a benevolent pagan prostitute loyal to Yahweh for a maternal ancestor, and a benevolent pagan who was extremely loyal to her Jewish mother-in-law seduced him to become his wife. These two pagans, named almost side-by-side, remind readers that the sons of Abraham were not the only ones moved and awed by Yahweh's power, thus making them keen to join his chosen people. Even here, in Matthew's genealogy, his readers are prepared for Jesus' later proclamations that the Jewish religious leaders would be replaced by pagan ones because the pagans seemed more faithful (Matt 8.11–12).

The Wife of Uriah

The fourth woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy, ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Οὐρίου, was unnamed. There was an element of seduction in her story, whether she seduced King David by traipsing around naked while he watched from the palace roof, or he wooed her once she was present in the palace upon an invitation after he saw her bathe (1 Sam 11). She is remembered primarily for her adultery with David and her husband's murder to cover up their illicit pregnancy. Yahweh was so displeased with the whole affair that their illicit child was not permitted to survive. However, their son Solomon would inherit the throne.

So, one can see sexual innuendo bordering on impropriety in the first four women's histories, yet their sons were all important ancestors in the Davidic line.³ Two

³ It is also argued that the inclusion of gentile women in the genealogy, coupled with the Wise Men, signified the universalism of Christ's message. See Günther Bornkamm, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, New Testament Library (London: SCM, 1963), 76; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, vol. 1, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel*

of these women bore illegitimate children (Tamar and the wife of Uriah), while the other two may be suspected of it given the circumstances.⁴ The first would be a single mom exonerated for what she did (Gen 38.26), and the other three would all be married.⁵

Mary

Mary, the last woman listed in this genealogy, was mentioned just before Christ. This was the only time that Matthew broke from his typical male-begat-male formula in his genealogy when he listed a woman from whom a son was born.⁶ This woman was still a virgin when she gave birth to her first child (Matt 1.25) and, of the five women mentioned in this genealogy, she was the only one who faced the prospect of divorce for being pregnant.⁷ Yet the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy were the most

According to Matthew. ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 188; Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, vol. 33A, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1993), 12; Craig A. Evans, *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Matthew-Luke*, vol. 1, Bible Knowledge Series (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 2003), 45.

⁴ See Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 56; Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Hoboken: KTAV PubHouse, 1987), 2; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 74; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary: New Testament Series (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 8.

⁵ Though it is not specifically stated that Rahab was married, she did integrate herself into Jewish life and culture (her survivors lived in Bethlehem, cf. Ruth 1.22-2.1), so it is safe to presume that she was married to Salmon. For Ruth, see Ruth 4.13; for the wife of Uriah, see 2 Sam 11.27.

⁶ This was to highlight how Joseph was not Jesus' father. Cf. Matt 1.24-25.

⁷ Note how Judah called Tamar *more righteous* (צַדִּיקָה מְאִיִּם) than he when he discovered that he was the father of his own grandchildren. All charges of adultery were then abandoned and she could live and keep the twins. Matthew then went on to characterise Mary as pure and Joseph as righteous in Matt 1.18-21.

honourable of the lot! Clearly, Matthew was setting the scene for Mary's extraordinary conception with the first four women in his genealogy.⁸

Mary was the only one mentioned by name when the Wise Men visited. All the men remained anonymous. This would be repeated later in the gospel when only women named Mary would be at Jesus' resurrection, whilst the men would be referred to as *disciples* (μαθηταῖς) and *brothers* (ἀδελφοίς) (Matt 28.7-10).⁹ In between these two episodes, only one new name would be mentioned in this gospel, and it would be in relation to divorce and remarriage.

⁸ See Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 19; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 23; France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 74; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 188; Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 13; Mounce, *Matthew*, 8.

⁹ Only once, in Matt 12.46, was Mary unnamed because it was her title, not her name that was important since Jesus was making a point about who his true family members were. He mentioned that *whoever does the will of my father in heaven* was his true mother or brother or sister. Families were redefined away from a biological lineage and towards a spiritual lineage and obedience to the will of God. This was a follow-up to Matt 10.35, showing that Christ was not exempt from the broken and redefined family dynamics of the kingdom of heaven. Shortly after Jesus described the kingdom of heaven in Matt 13.24-52, verses 54 and 55 recorded that the Nazarenes wondered aloud where Jesus got his wisdom and *these deeds of power* (αἱ δυνάμεις). Mary and her sons were all mentioned by name, but her husband and her daughters were not. This was in its immediate context a condemnation of the town of Nazareth who knew precisely who Jesus was, yet would still not accept him. It would also serve to foreshadow for Matt 27.55 where a woman named Mary was also mother to two of the boys listed in this verse, leading readers to believe that the one at the tomb was the same one who was in Nazareth. Since Jesus was dead, Mary was then referred to as the mother of her living sons, and the list might have been abbreviated to include only two names. It was also because James would be a prominent figure in the early church, and the second mention of *Joseph* in chapter 27 would balance at two the number of *Marys* and *Josephs* named at Christ's tomb. So, Christ was born to a Mary and Joseph, and he was buried with two Marys and a Joseph looking on in another Joseph's tomb.

Two More Women Named

Of the five women named in Christ's genealogy, only two more (Herodias and Mary Magdalene) were ever mentioned by name in the gospel. Herodias was described as *his brother Philip's wife* but understood to be married to Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch, based on John the Baptist's rebuke that it was illegal for Herod to have her (Matt 14.3-4). So, following his pattern set in the genealogy, Matthew referred to an adulterous woman who, in concert with her dancing daughter, conspired to have John the Baptist killed. The first woman adulterated with the King, the other seduced him at his birthday party into making an oath to murder a prophet. Not much had changed amongst the monarchy in the millennia since the reign of King David. This pericope united three themes found in the genealogy of Christ: seduction, adultery, and murder.¹⁰ The tragedy here was that Herod did not dare dishonour the oath he gave to his niece which resulted in the murder of a righteous man, but had no problem dishonouring his brother's oath of marriage with Herodias. So, the naming of women in Matthew's gospel almost always conjures up sexual impropriety.¹¹

¹⁰ This theme may be found in the story of King David and the wife of Uriah (2 Sam 11), and with King Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kgs 16.31-17.7; 18.1-19.10).

¹¹ Yolanda Dreyer assumes that Matthew's male characters understand Christ's calling but fail to implement it. He changed his source, Mark, where the disciples do not understand Christ's calling, so women could be used to fill the gap. Therefore, Mark was favourable to feminists whilst Matthew's gospel was not liberating for women. Matthew changed the role of Mark's men and women to make his gospel acceptable in Palestine. Women *received* Christ's love but did not *transmit* it. They merely served to show whether or not men fulfilled their calling. Yolanda Dreyer, "Gender Critique on the Narrator's Androcentric Point of View of Women in Matthew's Gospel: Original Research," *HTS* 67.1 (2011): 1-5. See also Andries G. van Aarde and Yolanda Dreyer, "Matthew Studies Today – a Willingness to Suspect and a Willingness to Listen," *HTS* 66.1 (2010). The same, however, can be flipped to say that Mark was conforming to his gentile audience by allowing women to speak and to divorce, so Matthew corrected him by giving the gospel a more authentic Palestinian flavour.

Independent Women

When comparing whom Matthew names and whom he does not, one can see that the named women all share the allegation of sexual impropriety. Eight women are named (two were *Mary*) in Matthew's gospel and the rest were anonymous,¹² as were many other characters. Everyone who was healed by Christ, regardless of gender, remained unnamed in this gospel. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and John the Baptist's disciples (presumably all men) were not named. In studying Matthew's patterns, one will notice that, regarding women, he mentioned them alongside their children, save thrice, to make a point about faithfulness, right action, or sexual impropriety.

What follows are cases in point; only three women were mentioned independently, without children or a husband, in Matthew.¹³ Two were anonymous. One can assume that the woman who bled for many years was ritually impure and no man wanted to go near her to procreate with her, so that was the reason why she was without child or husband. Her condition was embarrassing, she was timid in approaching Jesus for healing (Matt 9.20, 21), so she remained nameless initially by compassion, but the fact that she was healed because of her faith disqualified her from being named, as all recipients of healing in Matthew remain unnamed.

The other unnamed childless woman was a mysterious lady who showed up at Simon the leper's house and anointed Christ's head with some expensive ointment.

¹² Presumably, the Zebedee matriarch was unnamed because she had asked that her sons sit on either side of Christ in his kingdom, Matt 20.20-28; 27.55

¹³ Peter's mother-in-law was a fourth, but a daughter was implied because Peter was her son-in-law.

Readers know the name of the host (Matt 26.6), although they know nothing more about him nor what he did for Christ except welcome him into his home in Bethany.¹⁴

Furthermore, the name of Jesus' traitor (whose plot to kill Jesus and treachery bookended this pericope) who would, like the anonymous woman, also be mentioned wherever the good news is proclaimed, ὅπου ἐὰν κηρυχθῇ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦτο ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ (Matt 26.13) is known, but this woman, whom Jesus himself declared would be remembered throughout the world for what she had done, remained unnamed!¹⁵

The reason Judas would be named wherever the gospel is preached but the woman who anointed Christ at Simon the leper's house would not is possibly because Matthew chose to only name women, prophets, disciples, and political leaders in his gospel in order bring certain stories and historical events to mind. He further wished to make certain points about character, either by highlighting right action or misdeed. Usually, the named women reminded readers of sexual misdeeds done either by them or to them. Those unnamed, except for Herodias' daughter, were people of faith or right action — compare the old bleeding woman (9.20–22), the pagan Canaanite and her daughter (15.22–28), the woman who anointed Jesus (26.7), and Pilate's wife (27.19). Matthew did not name contemporary, faithful people because he wanted to place the attention on Jesus, his good works, and his faithfulness as an example to his followers. Therefore, those women who went unnamed in the gospel were not omitted due to patriarchy. Rather, Matthew had a purpose. The only contemporary people of faith whom Matthew

¹⁴ But see Luke 7.26-50.

¹⁵ One could argue that neither Matthew nor Simon the leper knew the woman's name. See Mark 14.3; Luke 7.36-50.

named and portrayed them as such were Joseph, Joseph of Arimathea, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene, who is the third woman unassociated with children or husband.¹⁶ It is unknown whether this last woman from Magdala was chaste, but the fact that her name was *Mary* conjures up the chastest woman mentioned in this gospel. It appears that Matthew utilised women's names to remind readers of sexual conduct.

Women & the Resurrection

The only one willing to plead for Jesus' cause at his trial before Pontius Pilate was the governor's wife, whose name is not mentioned, but who was willing to listen to the voice of God in her dreams (Matt 27.19). This was the third time God had spoken to someone in a dream in order to plead for his son's life, the first time a woman had a dream in this gospel, and it was the first time in the gospel that the dream was ignored.¹⁷ Pontius Pilate's wife served a twofold purpose in the gospel of Matthew: first of all, she reiterated the pattern at Christ's birth where political leaders were a threat to Jesus' safety with dreams giving a warning to preserve his life (Matt 1.18-2.23). Secondly, she was a contrast to the men involved in Christ's trial, particularly her own husband, since the couple could both see that Jesus was innocent, but Pilate was unwilling to let him go. Also, since a woman could bring forth a message from God about Christ prior to his

¹⁶ Neither John the Baptist's nor Christ's disciples are included in this list because John asked whether Jesus was the Messiah or should he expect another, and the disciples 1) are portrayed as confused about—rather than faithful to—Christ's mission, and 2) all abandoned Jesus after his arrest.

¹⁷ Joseph obeyed thrice in Matt 1.20; 2.13-14; 19. The three Wise Men did so in Matt 2.12.

death, why couldn't women—rather than one of the twelve—bring forth the news of his resurrection?¹⁸

The final prominent role women would have in this gospel would be to bring the good news of Christ's resurrection to men. Yahweh would no longer be veiled behind clouds after his son arose from the dead. His messenger appeared directly to humans – females – and entrusted them with spreading good news of great joy about the resurrection (Matt 28.5-8). So, Matthew began his gospel by highlighting the promiscuous and adulterous ways of men and women in Christ's genealogy, paused to highlight a very pure lady who gave birth as a virgin, and ended in true gentlemanly fashion, letting the ladies go first with the gospel.

Prostitutes, seducers, and adulterers could contribute sons to Israel's Abrahamic and Davidic ancestry, and these sons would go down in Jewish lore despite the dubious circumstances surrounding their conception. Yet Christ, born in the best and most honourable of circumstances, would be rejected. Matthew used the Christ's genealogy as a springboard to remind his readers of the Israelite monarchy's less than stellar sexual history, a theme that would continue throughout the gospel with several more references.¹⁹ Furthermore, Matthew's use of foreshadowing and recall will shed light on the interpretive link between Matt 1 and 5, and Matt 14 and 19.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that after Christ's disciples had abandoned him upon his crucifixion, all that were left to care for him and properly identify him were foreigners and females (Matt 27.54-56).

¹⁹ This was not the only purpose for his genealogy and the infancy narratives. Hagner notes that the first 2 chapters of Matthew say that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 12.

Main Male Characters

Joseph

Matthew established that Mary was the purest woman of them all, but he still had to make a case for her husband. Matthew made clear that Joseph was not the human father of Jesus by using the feminine ἐξ ἧς to refer exclusively to Mary as Jesus' only human parent (Matt 1.16). Matt 1.19 provided a character sketch of Joseph by calling him δίκαιος for wanting to divorce his pregnant wife on suspicion of adultery.

Joseph was meditating upon Torah when he heard of Mary's pregnancy, deciding with which course of action he ought to proceed. He decided to divorce his pregnant fiancée secretly (λάθρα).²⁰ God intervened for Mary in a dream, calling Joseph *Son of David* (υἱὸς Δαβὶδ), who was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13.14; cf. Acts 13.22). Joseph proved to be no different. He obeyed God to the point of allowing others to believe that he was Jesus' father.

Betrothal

Betrothal has no contemporary equivalent.²¹ The pair was considered husband and wife, though the wife would not live with him, nor would the couple consummate the

²⁰ He could have accused her of adultery, provoking a trial to determine whether she was raped or seduced. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 205. But see Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 56, who argues that *wanted*, ἐβουλήθη, was not natural with λάθρα since all volition is private. He says that it may be a corruption of ἐβουλεύθη, *took the decision*. In any event, Matthew used angels to explain what happened at Christ's conception and resurrection, never in between. Notice how Luke did not include this part of the birth narrative (1.26-38; 2.1-7) nor did he have the exception phrase when he discussed divorce (16.18).

²¹ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 77. Powell notes that it was indispensable to set the scene for Joseph to become aware of Mary's condition without having caused it. Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 55.

marriage for a year.²² Nevertheless, the couple were, for all intents and purposes, married; divorce papers would need to be drawn up and signed should the husband change his mind.²³ So this explained Joseph's line of thought. He was contemplating how to observe God's law expressed in Deut 24.1,²⁴ wanting to divorce an alleged adulteress mercifully in order not to humiliate the one who did not observe.²⁵ Divorcing her quietly would require only two witnesses.²⁶ Yet in a dream, he was instructed to keep Mary, and he obeyed; he kept Mary as his wife despite his right to divorce her for being pregnant by someone other than himself.²⁷

In this birth narrative, Mary was proven godly by her sexual purity, especially in the light of her ancestors, whilst Joseph was proven godly by his obedience to Yahweh.²⁸ Matthew was showing that Jesus' parents were from good, God-obeying stock, both in

²² Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 18. But see Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 200, who say that this may have only been the case after 70 AD or as late as 135 AD to prevent Roman soldiers from raping young girls.

²³ In Joseph's case, *put her away ἀπολῦσαι*, 1.19.

²⁴ This was foreshadowing the context of 19.3-9 where the same verse would be debated between the Pharisees and Christ. Cf. Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 46.

²⁵ Despite the Old Testament stoning penalty for adultery (Deut 22.13-21), Joseph's contemporaries instead insisted that a man divorce an unchaste wife. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 77

²⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 18; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 205; France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 77. But see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 116 who says that the cuckold needed only to meet with a trio of rabbis or priests to finalise the divorce.

²⁷ Furthermore, he took her despite difficult circumstances. *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 9 records how, when Pharaoh commanded all Hebrew infants be killed, men thought it wise not to approach their wives. Yet one man, Aram, took a wife and the Lord blessed him with a son named Moses who would survive the genocide and lead Israel out of Egypt. Cf. Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. . (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). God approached Joseph a second time in a dream after the Wise Men left. Yahweh asked him to protect his wife's son by fleeing the nation. Ever the righteous man, Joseph obeyed. A few verses later, the trifold of dreams to Joseph from God, telling him to return to the holy land, was obeyed.

²⁸ A fourth dream directing him to settle in Galilee was mentioned as insurance. Notice how angels did not appear to Mary in this narrative like they did in Luke's. Cf. Luke 1.26-38.

lifestyle and when commanded. His father was a descendent of King David²⁹ with whom Yahweh had a covenant, but Joseph would divorce an adulterous woman whereas David caused a woman to be an adulteress and then married her to cover up his sin. So, Jesus' life and his parents' marriage were preserved thanks to Joseph's obedience to Yahweh. The stage was set for Jesus to grow up to be obedient to Yahweh thanks to his parents' good example.³⁰

So, with Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy, the scene was set for the exception phrase in Matthew 5.32, which will be discussed at length later in this paper. There was a righteous individual who contemplated good deeds who adopted a son despite the circumstances. He would stand out against the likes of Herod the Great and Herod Antipas who were out to eliminate Jesus.

Males Used for Contrasting Reactions

There were two reactions to Christ in Matthew's gospel: obedience or rejection. In the infancy narratives, Joseph and the Wise Men served to highlight the righteous

²⁹ The angel calls him υἱὸς Δαυὶδ 1.20.

³⁰ The name *Joseph* was also important at Jesus' burial; it was mentioned twice in two verses (Matt 27.56, 57). A man from North Africa named Joseph approached Pontius Pilate and requested Jesus' body to have it wrapped in clean linen and placed in a new tomb (Matt 27.57-61). Mary and Joseph were pure and godly at Jesus' birth, and another Mary and Joseph ensured purity at his burial. Matthew's Joseph recalls the Joseph of Gen 37-50 who was the one who interpreted dreams, who remained faithful to God despite temptation to adulterate, who suffered oppression from slavery and imprisonment, and rose to save Jacob's tribe from annihilation and starvation by giving them food and protection in Egypt (Gen 37-50). The New Testament's Joseph's son Joshua (Jesus), whose name means *Redeemer*, was about to save Israel from far worse. Matthew ensured that Jesus' Joseph lived up to Jacob's in deed and in reputation.

reaction to Christ; Herod was there to highlight the wicked reaction. Like Pharaoh who ordered young Hebrews killed (Exod 1.22), Herod followed suit when Israel's next redeemer entered the scene (Matt 2.16). The Greek λάθρα in 1.19 and 2.7 was used to compare Joseph with Herod. Herod sought to keep his evil plan secret, whilst Joseph kept a righteous plan secret. Everything from 1.1 - 4.17 prepares the reader for what was to follow: a proper understanding of Jesus, two contrasting reactions to the true person of Christ, his anticipated rejection and his universal appeal.³¹ In the rest of the gospel, it was the religious leaders who took over from Herod.³² So, it is significant that the word ἐνθυμηθέντος was used in 1.20 to describe Joseph's action with regard to Mary's pregnancy just after he was described as δίκαιος in Matt 1.19, since the only time the word was ever used again in Matthew was in 9.4 when the evil in the Pharisees' hearts was revealed. This contrast of pondering evil and pondering good was used to show how a righteous person responded to Jesus' calling and how the unrighteous did the same.

It was after all of this set-up that Christ was able to speak up and teach his followers. The theme of divorce appears early in both Matthew's gospel (1.18-25) and in Jesus' first teachings in the gospel (5.31-32). Its primary position in both meant that it was important to both, and suggests that Matthew sought to link Joseph's story and Christ's teaching together.

³¹ Bornkamm, *Tradition and Interpretation*, 66.

³² To a lesser extent, Herod Antipas fell into this category since he rejected John the Baptist who preached a similar message to Jesus. Matt 14.1-12.

The Prophets

Matthew quoted several Old Testament prophets, sometimes naming them and other times leaving them anonymous. He quoted and cited Isaiah first and the most often.³³ He quoted Zechariah³⁴ thrice, Micah³⁵ and Hosea³⁶ twice, and Malachi³⁷ once without ever naming any of them. Jonah was also mentioned twice when the Pharisees asked for a sign and Jesus told them all they were going to get was *the sign of Jonah*, and once more when Peter was called *son of Jonah*.³⁸ Jeremiah was always named before he was quoted, and has the distinction of being the first prophet named in this gospel.³⁹ He was also the prophet that quoted God as saying he had divorced his people (Jer 3.8). There was also a veiled reference to Samuel in Matt 22.16 where Jesus was complemented for looking at the hearts of men rather than at their appearance just before being asked about whether to pay taxes to Caesar (1 Sam 16.7).

John the Baptist was included under this heading because the gospel associated him with Elijah. He was presented in this gospel in a most positive light as the one who

³³ Isa 7.14; 8.8, 10 in Matt 1.23; 40.3 in 3.3; 9.1 in 4.15; 53.4 in 8.17; 42.1, 4 in 12.18,21; 6.9 in 13.14; 29.13 in 15.7; 56.7 in 21.13.

³⁴ Zech 9.9 in Matt 21.4-5; Zech 11.12-13 in Matt 27.9-10; 13.7 in 26.31

³⁵ Mic 5.2 in Matt 2.5 and Mic 7.5, 6 in 10.35. It is interesting to note that Matthew omitted verse five in the second quote that hints at a spouse (מְשַׁכְּבֵת חֵיקָהּ שְׁמֵר פְּתִי-פִי;), thus omitting any mention of a spouse either in his quote of Micah or later in his quote of Christ. Is this because Matthew held the marriage covenant in high esteem? Was it that Jesus would never intend for marriage to fall apart in order for someone to follow him? (Note that Luke included the spouse in a similar saying in 14.26) In any event, one can assume that Jesus was not there to divide spouses. Perhaps including them in this statement would have hinted at something Matthew did not want to say: that celibacy was better than marriage, and that the marriage covenant was expendable for the Kingdom of Heaven.

³⁶ Hos 11.1 in Matt 2.15; Hos 6.6 in Matt 9.13.

³⁷ Mal 3.1 in Matt 3.3 and repeated again in 11.10.

³⁸ Jonah 1.17 in Matt 12.40 and 16.4 (τὸ σημεῖον Ἰωνᾶ), 17, (Βαριωνᾶ) although the final mentioned may be that Peter's dad was named *Jonah*.

³⁹ Jer 31.15 in Matt 2.17-18; 19.1-13 and 32.6-9 in 27.9-10; 7.11 in 21.13.

was *preparing the way of the Lord* (Isa 40.3. Cf. Matt 3.3; ἐτοιμάσατε τὴν ὁδὸν κυρίου), and linked with the great prophet Isaiah, the same one from which Jesus would read at the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth. This was the second of three times that Isaiah was present at the beginning of some important milestone in this gospel (Jesus' birth, the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry, and the beginning of Jesus' ministry).⁴⁰ Jesus was also twice understood to be John the Baptist reborn, once by Herod the Tetrarch in chapter 14, and once by the people in 16.13-14. Jesus twice identified John as Elijah (Matt 11.14; 17.11-13), and, in 16.14, Peter named John adjacent to two more Jewish prophetic powerhouses. It is clear that Jesus and the contemporary Israelites thought of these cousins as prophets because they associated one with the other, with Elijah and with Jeremiah. Jesus and John the Baptist would each suffer the fate of the prophets.⁴¹ So, it is clear that Matthew aligned John and Jesus' ministries with the prophets of old by citing the prophets and by recording their brutal, unlawful deaths. In fact, both of their brutal deaths are recorded so John's would foreshadow Christ's (Matt 14.8-12; 27.24-54).

Political Figures

King Herod was mentioned only once in this gospel and it was in the poorest of light, as a jealous monarch who would kill little children to preserve his crown (2.1-16).

⁴⁰ Birth: Isa 7.14 in Matt 1.23; John the Baptist's ministry: Isa 40.3 in Matt 3.3; Beginning of Jesus' Ministry: Isa 9.12 in Matt 4.14-16.

⁴¹ It is important to point out that Matthew and Jesus did not quote the Old Testament in the same way. Matthew usually introduced quotes by the prophets as these last ones having *spoken* something, whereas Christ introduced a quote by the prophets as something that was *written*. This is later seen when Jesus asked his opponents, *Have you not read?* Compare: 1.22; 2.15, 17 (*spoken*) vs. 4.4, 7, 9 (*it is written*).

Jesus was juxtaposed against him, proving later in his life that he would cherish young ones (19.13-15). As a king, he was willing to die for his people rather than kill his own people. Archelaus scared Joseph away from ever settling back in the Judean area of Israel (2.22-23). Finally, Herod the Tetrarch was mentioned in the context that he was responsible for the cruel death of John the Baptist (14.1-12), the latter having criticised him for his divorce and remarriage. Jesus' Kingdom stood in contrast to its contemporaries and did not have much to live up to in order to be good. From his birth to his death, politics would surround Christ's life. Being a firstborn of the Davidic line, Jesus was a king. Matthew showed his readers the corrupt politics in Judea's recent history, and then he would use part of his gospel comparing Jesus against these evil individuals, including the matter of divorce and remarriage.

Caesar was thrice named in Matt 22 as a reviled figure who collected taxes. He was not understood to be present, nor was there any insult or complement to his character. The first time the collection of taxes was mentioned in chapter 17 (Matt 17.24-27), Christ and Peter exonerated foreigners for collecting taxes upon them because the pair would collect taxes upon others rather than their kin. Jesus decided to miraculously provide for his and Peter's Temple tax so as not to offend those who taxed their own. What is important, though, is the second reference to taxes in the Caesar pericope. In chapter 22, Christ said the same as above, although not explicitly. Here, he was unafraid to offend the Pharisees who collected taxes from their brethren when doing so for their own enrichment (Matt 21.12, 13), which was what tax collectors were accused of—but ostracised for—doing, by the Pharisees. Jesus was getting braver as his death was imminent. He called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and told his disciples to obey

them, but never to behave like them (Cf. Matt 5.20.). So, Jesus' behaviour was in stark contrast to his opponents' hypocrisy. It can be expected that their sexual ethic was also questioned.

The Disciples

Peter was the first disciple named, the most often named, and the second to last named disciple in this gospel.⁴² He, like the next three named apostles (Andrew, James, and John) left their nets and followed Jesus at his request (Matt 4.18-22). However, Peter was rarely portrayed in a positive light and exited Matthew's gospel account in shame.⁴³ The Zebedee brothers did not fare much better.⁴⁴

The fifth and last disciple named in this gospel⁴⁵ is Matthew, who not only followed Jesus but also threw him a party with a gang of sinners present (Matthew 9.9). This party caused consternation amongst Jesus' opponents and amongst his allies, the disciples of John the Baptist who were fasting because their leader was imprisoned (Matt

⁴² He is first named in 4.18, then 22 more times 10.2; 14.28, 29; 15.15; 16.16, 18, 22, 23; 17.1, 4, 24, 26; 18.21; 19.27; 26.33, 35, 37, 40, 58, 69, 73, 75.

⁴³ For his exit, see Matt 26.75. Matt 17.24 was one of the few times that Peter was not put in a bad light. He answered Christ correctly, obeyed him, and collected the funds so they can each pay the temple tax. This pericope was more about Jesus than it was about Peter, but Matthew could have been building him up to tear him down later. Matt 18.21 where Peter asked the question about forgiveness and was mildly rebuked by Christ further bolsters this theory. Ironically, Peter would need forgiveness for his later denial of Christ after promising never to do so. Finally, in Matt 19.27, 28, Peter was mentioned as one of the 12 judges of Israel. For a broader study of Peter in negative light in Matthew's gospel, see Robert H Gundry, *Peter: False Disciple and Apostate According to Saint Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

⁴⁴ The brothers Zebedee were with Jesus and Peter on the mount of Transfiguration (17.1ff), but would later be embarrassed by their mother's request that they be seated on either side of Christ in his kingdom (20.20). They were never mentioned by name afterwards.

⁴⁵ That is, outside of the list in Matt 10.1-4.

4.12). Jesus defended his partying ways by alluding to the *newness* of his actions.⁴⁶ He then performed two miracles in which he gave each a woman and a girl new life (Matt 9.18-26). Matthew ensured that these characters served to point to Christ's—and not their own—authority on matters theological, natural, and spiritual. All of these would be summed up and applied in the new concept *the Kingdom of Heaven* that he claimed was at hand for those who repented.

The Kingdom of Heaven

This term is often mentioned in Matthew's Gospel, so it must be given close attention. Although it was not a main *character*, it did have a major *role* in Matthew. It was what John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, and what the disciples were to proclaim. Finally, this kingdom was often described as being near (ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν in Matt 3.2; 4.17), so Jesus took the time to elaborate what exactly was the kingdom of heaven, how it could be identified, what it looked like, how it manifested – in short, Jesus described its character. And so, an examination of those descriptions is in order.

Matt 10.7 marked the first time the kingdom of heaven was described in the gospel. Everything about it was gentle, passive, nonaggressive, and peaceful.⁴⁷ The good

⁴⁶ He referred to himself as the groom, as in newlywed, then to new cloth and, finally, to new wine.

⁴⁷ The kingdom of heaven was mentioned seven times in Matt 13.24-52, each time in a passive and nonviolent sense. Thrice it was described as something that grew: once the passive victim of the evil one that was mixed with weeds, once a seed that grew so strong it could provide support for birds and their nests, then it was like leavened yeast mixed with flour by a woman to give what she was baking flavour and texture. Thrice it was described as something of value: a treasure hidden in a field which prompted an individual to sell all he had to buy the field, once it was fine pearls in which a merchant sold all that he owned to afford them, and once it was a

news of the kingdom of heaven involved healing, cleansing, purification, and new life for free. It also involved great faith by those who were proclaiming the good news because they were to travel light in order to rely on those who heard the message to provide for them. Peace was to be upon those who welcomed the disciples, and peace was to be retained from those who did not; the disciples were not to be violent on the latter because Christ promised them that those towns would suffer more than Sodom and Gomorrah on Judgment Day.

If there were to be violence in the kingdom of heaven, it was to come at the hands of others who would beat its citizens and falsely accuse them in Jesus' name (10.17). Still, persecutors were to be fled, not fought. Holy Spirit would give the disciples the words necessary to defend themselves before any court. Jesus warned of conflicts between children, parents and between siblings, concluding, "one's foes will be members of one's own household (Matt 10.36, NRSV: ἐχθροὶ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου οἱ οἰκιακοὶ αὐτοῦ)." All violence and condemnation towards the enemies of the kingdom of heaven would occur at the end of days, not in the present era. This passive description of the kingdom of heaven continued with a commentary on John the Baptist (Matt 11.11). Though he was the greatest on earth, he would be the least in the kingdom of heaven. Just as he had

scribe who could appreciate both his new treasures and his old ones. Amid the treasure parables Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as a net that caught *fish of every kind* (ἐκ παντὸς γένους συναγαγούση; it was passive in the sense that it was the fisherman who cast it and pulled it into the boat). But, after the fishing was done and the fishermen were ashore, the fish were sorted in a binary fashion (good versus bad) just like the farmer at harvest would sort the wheat and weeds. Good people who grew to be useful were treasured and were promised freedom from oppression at the end of their days in the kingdom of heaven.

suffered without retaliation, so the kingdom of heaven suffered violence and its citizens were taken by violence.

In the temple, Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a wedding where there was joy, celebration, and peace (Matt 22.2-14.).⁴⁸ However, when the guests refused to attend the wedding, there was brutal violence: they were all killed and their village was sacked because they were not worthy of the banquet. Others were invited, but when a guest who did present himself without the proper wedding attire, he was bound and cast out “into the outer darkness” (εἰς τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον). So, Jesus assured everyone that good would triumph over evil in the kingdom of heaven. Just like the weeds were to be burnt and the bad fish thrown away, so, too, would the unworthy guests be annihilated. The kingdom would benefit from violence, but not once in this gospel was it to instigate it. No one, even those closest to the kingdom in Jesus’ day, was to inherit this gem should its king be disobeyed.⁴⁹

When Jesus did speak directly of a kingdom that was violent, he used *kingdom of God* instead (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ). There seemed to be a more aggressive tone to the kingdom of God and more passive one to the kingdom of heaven. Upon being accused of being in league with Beelzebub (Matt 12.25), Christ gave an aggressive and violent example of how he managed to defeat Satan by the spirit of God. He then referred to this kingdom as τοῦ θεοῦ rather than τῶν οὐρανῶν. Matthew may have been trying to counter the popular belief that Messiah would bring imperial liberty and establish his own

⁴⁸ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν in Matt 25.1 is again compared to a wedding.

⁴⁹ This was enforced in 23.13, 14 when Jesus cursed the Pharisees, who would not inherit the kingdom of heaven for preventing others from getting into the kingdom.

imperial rule after driving the Romans out of Israel by mentioning kingdom of heaven in such a passive and un-warlike manner.⁵⁰ Christ followers can then be expected to be peaceful, and to preserve what God has created (one of those things being marriage, 19.6) rather than destroying it or tearing it apart.

Conclusion

These preliminary observations use Matthew's literature to understand his mind and his perception of his context. Matthew's genealogy highlighted five women who were—or suspected to be—sexually indiscreet. Nevertheless, their offspring were all fulfilment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. Divorce is the theme of his first narrative that follows this genealogy, meaning it was important to Matthew. Furthermore, Jesus' parents were righteous individuals who raised him to be the same. Joseph was called such, whilst Mary was exonerated for being pregnant despite not having been with Joseph.

Henceforth, whenever individuals are named in the gospel, they fall in one of two categories: they are either 1) sexually indiscreet/unrighteous or 2) righteous. Matthew's intent in doing so was to contrast reactions to Christ's edicts. The political and religious figures would reject Jesus whilst his disciples and the Wise Men would revere him. Consequently, those who followed him would inaugurate and propagate the passive and non-violent kingdom of heaven like the prophets of old. Jesus is seen as the culmination of the prophetic vocation and cast as one of them in his sufferings for Yahweh's cause.

⁵⁰ After all, heaven is no earthly thing, so it could hardly be associated with Israel on this world.

Matthew developed his characters in such a way so as to highlight events in the Old Testament that would recall major character flaws or strengths in order to make a point about the characters he included in his gospel. Sexual indiscretion was a common character flaw in this gospel. Some of those suspected of it factored prominently in covenantal fulfilment, while others were excluded from any sort of “righteous” distinction. These observations will shed light on the relation between Matt 1 and 5, and Matt 14 and 19 when investigating the exception phrases.

CHAPTER 2

THE EXCEPTION PHRASE IN MATTHEW 5

The quest to cipher Matthew's intent for divorcés centres around two key passages: Matt 5.32 & 19.9. The exception phrases appear in almost identical fashion, but in different contexts. Matt 5 is said in a sermon and couched between points on lust and oaths. Husbands are exonerated here for divorcing their adulterous wives, which is a likely reference to Joseph in Matt 1 since he was called *righteous* for his intent to divorce a (seemingly) unchaste wife. Matthew's possible meanings and intentions for his audience, what it meant to first century Jews, and how it affected the divorced are explored below and in the next chapter to understand his reasoning for repeating this phrase twice.

Understanding Divorce and Remarriage in Ancient Judea

The Pentateuch is fragmentary since it is an incomplete law whose purpose, says Instone-Brewer, was to highlight where Israelites differed from other ancient near eastern societies (e.g. Lev 18.3).¹ Where the Pentateuch was silent he asserts, it agreed with the prevailing culture. Thus, in general, women had more rights in the Pentateuch, especially wives and divorcées. In a world where polygamy and divorce was the norm, the monogamist ideal in Gen 2.24 was not seen as such until the second or first century BC.

¹ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 20

Nowhere were polygamy and divorce discouraged or condemned, nor were the rights of the divorcée expanded upon in Torah. So, readers must assume that the ancient Israelites did what was common at the time in the ancient near east except for what was said in Torah.²

Remarriage was expected. Torah differed from contemporary culture by permitting Israelite divorcées to remarry without having to wait for a pre-set amount of time. Furthermore, their former husbands could not return to reclaim them at any time. An Israelite woman, thus, had the right to remain married, unlike her peers in other lands.³

The divorce certificate in Deut 24.1-4 was a necessary innovation to guarantee that a divorcée would be allowed to remarry and remain so. Though its initial wording is uncertain, it read, “You are allowed to marry any [Jewish] man you wish” from the fifth century BC.⁴ Since men could marry more than one woman at a time, but women could not do the same with men, the certificate was invaluable for a woman to prove that she was eligible and not under threat of her former husband returning to charge her with adultery. It further afforded her the right to remain remarried by simultaneously revoking the initial couple’s right to remarry. This was to prevent her first husband coercing her

² Ibid, 24.

³ Another example includes the fate of raped women and those falsely accused of not being virgins on their honeymoon; they could never be divorced, and their husbands had to provide for them for the remainder of their lives (Deut 22.13-29). This was far more generous than Middle Assyrian Law #55, which supposed that the wife of the rapist be raped. Other ancient near eastern cultures, such as the Code of Hammurabi (in particular #133-136) or the Laws of Eshnunna (eg. #26) had no such parallels to Torah. See COS. For a comparison of Ancient Near Eastern Law with Torah, see Ibid, 1-34.

⁴ Ibid, 30; See also Markham J Geller, “Elephantine Papyri and Hosea 2,3,” *JSJ* 8.2 (1977): 141.

second husband to return her to him. With the law as written in Deut 24.1-4, however, no previous husband could return to reclaim her, ever. This was against the prevailing attitudes in contemporary cultures surrounding Israel, which made remarriage difficult, and the right to remain remarried impossible.⁵ Instone-Brewer makes clear that the rights found in the Pentateuch were extensions of the rights found in other ancient near eastern cultures save for the divorce certificate. Torah regulated polygamy, and divorce occurred to give women greater rights without condemning either practice.⁶

The inter-testamental period saw increased rights for women, particularly in the Qumran community who insisted upon equal application of the law across genders. For example, Lev 18.13 forbade an uncle from marrying a niece, but not an aunt from marrying a nephew. 11QTemple 66.16-17 says that it ought to have equal application, thus forbidding aunts from marrying nephews.⁷ It is possible that Mark was doing the same when he cited Jesus about divorce in 10.11-12, and that Mathew was hinting at such in 19.9.

With the encroachment of the Greco-Roman world further east, divorces became common, marriages became unstable, and the adherence to strict monogamy was introduced. Jewish women, especially at Elephantine, were able to demand divorces. The reforms of Simeon ben Shetah (first century BC) made divorce less calamitous and cruel by assuring women's financial security with the *ketubah* (a prenuptial agreement whereby a dowry was paid to the divorcée in lieu of a wedding dowry paid to the father),

⁵ For a helpful summary of the extant literature and its comparison to Torah, see Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, chapter 2.

⁶ Ibid, 33.

⁷ Ibid., 68.

though it did not have its intended effect of reducing the number of contemporary Jewish divorces.⁸ This is likely because marriage and divorce in the first century were private affairs. No one could interfere with either so long as custom was followed. The man would declare that he was taking a woman to be his wife upon marriage, and he would hand her a certificate of divorce upon divorce. Nothing else was necessary save consummation, which was also a private affair. Thus, the rulings of contemporary rabbis (i.e., Hillel & Shammai) would have been merely academic.⁹

Divorce was undesirable but sometimes necessary. Rabbis in the first century BC taught that the causes for divorce were barrenness (whose deadline was 10 years, then the parties could divorce and remarry others with whom they might be fertile)¹⁰, neglect, and infidelity. Men had the more direct route of enacting divorces, but women could do everything except write the certificate of divorce by using a court to pressure husbands into divorce.¹¹

Infidelity was not as it is today since polygamy was still permissible. Thus, a man was not expected to be faithful to one woman. He would offend another husband by sleeping with the latter's wife, or offend a father to whom a dowry was owed should he sleep with his unmarried daughter. A woman was expected to be monogamous. Adultery was not mutual since the modern concept of monogamy was non-existent. A woman

⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁹ Burton Scott Easton, "Divorce and the New Testament," *ATHR* 22.2 (1940): 78–87.

¹⁰ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 85. Burton Scott Easton, "Divorce and the New Testament," 80. But see MacArthur who claims that infertility became a greater concern upon the sacking of Jerusalem in 70 AD than it had been in previous centuries. Harvey McArthur, "Celibacy in Judaism at the Time of Christian Beginnings," *AUSS* 25.2 (1987): 163–81.

¹¹ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 85.

would forfeit her *ketubah* if it were proven that she 1) committed adultery, or 2) acted in such a way that would cause it. Joseph was particularly generous with his pregnant betrothed by keeping her as his wife, and did what was standard by refraining from her sexually until after the baby was born.¹²

A guiding light for Jewish marriage and divorce is found in Exod 21.10-11. A slave wife was to be fed, clothed, and loved by her husband. If she wasn't, she could be divorced and gain her freedom from slavery. A free woman was to live in a house with similar or better conditions as the ones in which she was raised. Fines were used to inspire spouses to the right course of action when they neglected each other based on these provisions. A free wife was to keep her *ketubah* for lack of food, clothing, and love.¹³

It is clear from this brief summary that Jews had taken it for granted that there were causes for divorce and that one was expected to remarry upon divorce. Infidelity was defined differently than it is today, and monogamy was not a contemporary concept. Nevertheless, Jewish women had more rights than their neighbours in other lands, and their remarriage was an expected outcome upon divorce. Just as Torah did not condemn divorce and remarriage, neither would any Jewish sect in any century condemn them.

¹² Ibid.; Friedrich Hauck and Seigfried Schulz, "Πόρνη," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 579. Allison posits that Matthew may have agreed with Seneca (*Jovinianum* 1.49), Philo (*Spec.* 3.9), and the Essenes as described by Josephus (*Bell.* 2.161) that intercourse was not to take place when one's wife was pregnant. Therefore, Joseph was righteous both for his obedience to Holy Spirit in a dream and to contemporary sexual convention. Dale C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 163-172.

¹³ For more on free women, see Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 107

The Sermon on the Mount vis à vis Mosaic Law

The Sermon on the Mount is a perfection of Mosaic Law in the context of discipleship training. Matthew thought the Sermon on the Mount to be so important that he placed it as Jesus' first major block of teaching in the gospel. The sermon is fundamentally Jewish and portrays Christianity at its ideal. Christ's ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν is authoritative and alien to the rabbis, says Hagner, and was used to stamp Messiah's more spiritual interpretation of Torah as final.¹⁴

I. J. du Plessis observes that the Sermon on the Mount carries with it demands of obedience to the law with its own *religio-ethical* characteristics to fit the Kingdom of heaven.¹⁵ Jesus attacked traditional interpretations of the Mosaic Law, particularly a man's attitude to marriage (5.27-32). Christ brought new ethical demands when he called husbands to reciprocal fidelity to their wives, that adultery begins in the heart when a husband looks upon any other woman lustfully, intentionally whetting his lust with his gaze upon her. Jesus' later point on divorce (31-32) is not an extensive lecture on divorce, but it is an elevation of the expectations of men towards their wives. Should a wife be divorced for any other reason than adultery, she would be forced into adultery upon remarriage.

Matthew radicalised the framework for Torah observance by making Jesus *the* superior interpreter of the established law and prophets. From Matthew's point of view, Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets so that, in him, anyone could find their true

¹⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 86.

¹⁵ I. J. Du Plessis, "The Ethics of Marriage According to Matt. 5:27-32," *Neot 1* (1967): 16-27.

meaning (Matt 5.17). Jesus transcended the law; he did not violate it. To Matthew, the law was relative, but Christ's words were permanent because they proposed an attitude not found in the law. Everything that Jesus said was a new way to know Yahweh and his creation (Matt 5.18-20).¹⁶ He wished his commandments to be internalised to foster obedience and to avoid condemnation. Matt 5 was clear in stating that the Old Testament was God-given and needed to be properly applied. The entire chapter was a summary of Jesus' ethical demand set in contrast to a contemporary ethic.¹⁷ It focused more on someone's motives in obeying God than a literal conformity to God's law. Jesus began with a literal understanding of Old Testament law and then gave his definitive declaration of God's will.¹⁸

The Sermon on the Mount was a constitution for the Matthean community organized by Matthew himself to bring order to relationships and to behaviour within the community.¹⁹ Matt 5-7 gave concrete examples of what its righteousness may have looked like, stressing one's disposition as much as one's actions. There was no distinction between desire and deed, because the wise and the foolish were morally competent and morally deficient, respectively, so *inward purity* was important for proper

¹⁶ Cf. Elian Cuvillier, "Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel: Matthew and First-Century Judaism: A Contribution to the Debate," *NTS* 55.2 (2009): 155; André Feuillet, "L'indissolubilité Du Mariage et Le Monde Féminin D'après La Doctrine Évangélique et Quelques Autres Données Bibliques Parallèles," *ScrTh* 17.2 (1985): 423; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 96-97.

¹⁷ M.J. Down, "The Sayings of Jesus about Marriage and Divorce," *ExpTim* 95.11 (1984): 333.

¹⁸ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 118.

¹⁹ Further evidence that the Sermon on the Mount was about proper relationships within the religious community is that *brother* was used four times in 5.21-24.

relationships.²⁰ Living per the Beatitudes would delay the world's moral decay through right action and right desire. Matthew wanted to shape behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes. In all things, this community of Christ followers was to be different from the communities around them, especially in their marital relationships.

Lust (Matt 5.27-30)

To look upon another lustfully is to commit adultery in one's heart, where Torah ought to reside. The Greek γυναῖκα in 5.28 is any woman, not just the wife of another, and τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι is only ever used here in this gospel and whose subject could possibly be αὐτήν which means *looking at a woman to cause her to desire [another] who leads her to adulterate*.²¹ So Jesus was warning one not only to stay away from sin, but also to refrain from causing another to sin.

The teaching in Matt 5.29–30 chose the right eye and hand because the right was the favourable side, though cutting off was hyperbole since sin lies in the heart.²² Jesus did not stand alone in insisting that desire was as sinful as deed (Cf. *Let. Aris.* 133;

²⁰ Mounce, *Matthew*, 45. J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 95-96.

²¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 120; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 523; Walter Bauer et al., “Ἐπιθυμέω,” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature ; A Translation and Adaptation of Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 371-372. Keener suggests that one's wife may be habitually seeking another man's affections. Though that man dutifully rebuffs her advances, she is nevertheless causing him to desire her and leading him to adulterate. Craig S Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 32.

²² Keener believes that Jesus was using hyperbole as a colourful way to get his point across as opposed to the modern understanding that hyperbole is used to deceive. Keener, *And Marries Another*, 24.

T. Gad 5.5; *T. Jos.* 17.3; *Ps.-Phoc.* 52; *Sent. Sextus* 233).²³ He used graphic hyperbole to make his point about staying away from sin. Jesus' words resembled the amputation suffered by the faithful who refused to commit apostasy during Antiochus IV's pogroms (2 Macc 6-7).²⁴ Amputation will never curb passion, so the imperative was not a literal one. The Greek σκανδαλίζω is cognate with a bait stick in a trap that springs and secures the animal.²⁵ One's habits can trap an individual in sin, risking judgement and eternal damnation. The tearing out, ἔξελε, and cutting off, ἔκκοπον, of the right eye or hand in vv.29-30 is hyperbolic, meaning all Christians ought to take drastic measures to avoid sexual sin since it leads to judgement (cf. Isa 57.8).²⁶ Since one lusts with the eye, the hand could have referred to onanism as a result of one's lust with the right eye.²⁷ The problem of one's inner disposition is the foremost cause of physical sin. Jesus' point in 5.26-30 was that his followers were to focus on the causes of sin (thoughts and desires, i.e. the right eye) and get rid of them in their lifetime before they lead to an act of sin (i.e. the right hand). Its literal translation seems directed exclusively at men, but the inclusive nature of Christ's teachings is implied (e.g., Matt 5.32). Jesus was boldly stating that men were to remain sexually faithful to their marriages like wives were expected to do so.²⁸

²³ Cf. Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 116.

²⁴ Amputation was suggested by Plato (*Symposium* 204C), Aristotle (*Eudemean Ethics* 7.1), and Sextus (*Sentences of Sextus* 12-13, 273).

²⁵ Mounce, *Matthew*, 46.

²⁶ Davies and Allison believe that the right hand, ἡ δεξιὰ σου χεὶρ, in 5.30 may be a euphemism for one's penis. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 523-525.

²⁷ Ibid, 525.

²⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 224-225.

Adultery & Divorce

The three antitheses found in 5.21-32 were aimed at maintaining or re-establishing good relationships by recognizing that one's inner disposition – and one's responsibility towards it – is essential in achieving this goal.²⁹ Divorce flows naturally after a discourse on lust and adultery since the latter is often cause for divorce.³⁰ Jesus disallowed divorce where Moses allowed it by requiring husbands to present their wives with a certificate that was intended to protect women from hasty action by the husband. Instead, Jesus declared marriage to be a life-long partnership between a man and woman. Under Mosaic Law, marriage came to an end at adultery due to the death penalty (Lev 20.10; Deut 22.22). Thus, the law served to limit the number of divorces and to show just how serious divorce is when a man is forbidden to remarry his former spouse had she remarried then divorced again (Deut 24.1-4). Marriage is not to be taken lightly. Jesus was saying that divorce is serious because it causes others to adulterate.³¹

Christ did not interpret the law in Matt 5, so others' interpretations were not in view here. Remarriage as adultery was not an interpretation of Torah, but a new pronouncement that went beyond it by placing its authority in Him. Christ demanded his followers surpass the law in their attitudes and behaviours. So Matt 5.31 was a brief

²⁹ Cf. Keener, *And Marries Another*, 19.

³⁰ Adultery preceded murder in the Decalogue, but here Matthew reversed the order for effect.

³¹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 123-125; Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 80; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 120; Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 224.

summary of the procedure outlined in Deut 24.1-4 rather than a commentary on what other rabbis had said.³²

Although all scholars cited above agree that Jesus was demanding a transformed heart rather than a minimalist obedience to Torah, their interpretations for verse 32 differ as to the extent and severity of Christ's exception. Blomberg figures it likely referred to spiritual idolatry, whilst Powell declares that all divorce, though permitted by the Law, involves adultery and therefore injury to someone else, making it unlawful.³³ Lloyd-Jones believes that the only thing that could dissolve a union permanently is unfaithfulness. The offended spouse could remarry as though he/she were widowed. Divorce for any other reason was illegitimate, and remarriage caused one to commit adultery.³⁴ Blomberg argues that unfaithfulness alone does not dissolve a marriage since the only appeal for that position is to Matt 5.32.³⁵ He further argues that Jesus broadened the meaning of adultery in his Sermon on the Mount to include those who looked at a woman with the

³² Matt 5.31 was likely drawn from Luke 16.18 rather than Mark 10.10-12, since they share a common phrase about divorcing a wife, and they speak of marrying a divorced woman Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 531; Keener, *And Marries Another*, 27. But see both Brooks and Lloyd-Jones who contend that the two passives in 5.31 elaborate Christ's teaching. Brooks argues that this verse has no parallel story, so it comes from either Matthew or from M. He mentions that v.31 broke from other antithetical statements when it used δέ, and that it lacked the second person address. Furthermore, v.33 used πάλιν, which was typically used by Matthew to resume the narrative after an interpretation (Cf. Matt 4.7, 8; 13.45, 47; 18.19, 19.24; 20.5; 22.4; 26.42-44, 72; 27.50). Matthew also quoted Deut 24 rather than the Decalogue, so it was different from the other antitheses. Lloyd-Jones posits that this was perhaps because Matt 5.31-32 was the first of six statements where Christ compared his teaching on Mosaic Law to popular, contemporary Pharisaic interpretations of Mosaic Law. Stephenson H. Brooks, *Matthew's Community: The Evidence of His Special Sayings Material*, vol. 16, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 34-36; Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 223.

³³ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 110; Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 83.

³⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 224.

³⁵ Craig L Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *TJ* 11.2 (1990): 182.

intent of committing adultery or for the purpose of getting her to lust after him (and, supposedly, to act upon that lust). Jesus was therefore condemning lustful thoughts that lead to desire for any other than one's spouse, rather than instructing others as to the right reasons for divorce.³⁶

Still others argue that one could be exonerated from wrongdoing so long as divorce followed certain criteria. Weibling points out that a cuckold may still possess his wife's body legally but holds nothing in her heart. Thus, he is not guilty if he lets her go because she assumes the responsibility for adultery entirely.³⁷ Paul Force posits that Matt 5 does not accuse the man of adultery, but it accuses him of forcing the woman into adultery once she remarries, unless she's an adulteress, where the husband can have a clear conscience.³⁸ Still others go further. Patte says that, if someone marries a divorced woman, he will commit adultery. However, if a *wrong union* already existed, then there was no objection to divorce. The point of the passage was a directive to the disciples that they ought to preserve marriage.³⁹ Sigal paraphrases Jesus in Matt 5.32 as essentially saying, "You have heard that Deut 24.1 means divorce is fine, but I tell you that divorce is limited only to πορνεία."⁴⁰ Therein lies the source of all competing interpretations: the meaning and application of πορνεία. It will be examined in greater depth later in the paper.

³⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 111-12.

³⁷ Fast-forward to Matt 19, he says, and a hard-hearted husband would assume culpability for the divorce. James M Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark on Divorce," *TJ* 22.2 (2001): 229

³⁸ Paul Force, "Encore Les Incises de Matthieu!" *BLE* 94.4 (1993): 319.

³⁹ Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 80.

⁴⁰ Phillip Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth According to the Gospel of Matthew* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 100. See also Keener, *And Marries Another*, 27-28.

The Exception Phrase

The first iteration of Matthew's exception phrase occurred here in 5:32. The main points of debate are whether or not it was a true exception, and whether or not Jesus made the statement to inform his followers of the one and only correct reason for divorce, or whether he was strongly stating his—and Yahweh's—preference for life-long, monogamous marriage. Guenther says that *παρεκτός* should be read with an exceptive meaning, that it was understood to exclude a minority of features or instances of what was being predicated, and to imply that what was true of the majority about the subject or class was not characteristic of that which was excluded.⁴¹ According to the traditional interpretation, *παρεκτός* carried the implication that if a woman were guilty of a *λόγου πορνείας*, the divorcing man was not committing adultery by divorcing her or by remarrying. It was an exception from whatever was identified as universal.⁴² Guenther concludes thus: "The adverb *παρεκτός* in Matt 5:32, on the other hand, follows a distinct syntactic pattern which characterises the exceptive meaning. In its present construction, *παρεκτός* cannot be exclusionary."⁴³

⁴¹ Allen R Guenther, "The Exemption Phrases: Except Πορνεία, Including Πορνεία or Excluding Πορνεία? (Matthew 5:32; 19:9)," *TynBul* 53.1 (2002), 86. See also Fleming who says that *παρεκτός* rarely meant *outside of* in the inclusive sense, so it meant *proceeding from* adultery. Thomas V Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," *TS* 24.1 (1963): 106–20. But see Mahoney who says that *παρεκτός* meant *outside* and governed *λόγου πορνείας*. Aidan Mahoney, "New Look at the Divorce Clauses in Mt 5:32 and 19:9," *CBQ* 30.1 (1968): 29–38.

⁴² Guenther, "The Exemption Phrases," 86.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 96. See also Leeming and Dawson who say that the meaning of *παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας* is exceptive, not exclusionary. *πορνείας* likely refers to *זָנָה דְּבָרָא* in Deut 24.1 to mean "illegitimate marriage" as it does in 1 Cor 5.1, Acts 15.20, John 8.41, and Heb 12.16. Christ's forbidding of divorce never intended that a man remain married illegitimately, so Matthew included the exception phrase. Bernard Leeming and R.A. Dawson, "Except It Be for Fornication?," *Scr* 8.3 (1956): 75–82.

Powell asserts that the qualification *fornication apart* appears to be a logical exclusion of circumstances in which divorce does not necessarily involve injury to another party, presupposing a distinction in the first part of the verse between μοιχεία (marital) and πορνεία (extra-marital). The second part of verse 32 used a form (μοιχᾶσθαι) of the word for *commit adultery* different from that already used in part 1 (μοιχεῖν).⁴⁴ The point Jesus was trying to make here was not what constituted the grounds for divorce, but that marriage was a lifelong partnership, that divorce was not meant to happen, and that both sexes were to remain faithful to each other within the marriage. At no point did Jesus assume that divorce *ought* to happen. He merely conceded *that* it happened.⁴⁵ Matthew's exception phrase merely spelt out what was taken for granted in current thinking, which explains why it was left out of Luke and Mark.⁴⁶ Conformity to the character of God was what the disciples ought to do, which meant keeping one's wife.⁴⁷

Instone-Brewer suggests modern scholars interpret this passage in light of what any first century Jew understood upon hearing these passages or assisting to similar debates. Divorce and remarriage were not condemned, they were expected, and they were to be regulated. Matt 5 is clear that divorce is a serious and awful thing. Jesus was interested in the life-long, monogamous marriage between a man and a woman, and

⁴⁴ Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 83.

⁴⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 122, emphasis his.

⁴⁶ Instone-Brewer says that is why Luke's account was so short; it is the only thing that differentiated Jesus' teaching from the rest of contemporary Judaism. Mark and Matthew's add a few more details, such as the contemporary rabbinic debate and a reference to the divorce certificate, but omit the reasons for divorce in Exod 21.10-11. Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 167.

⁴⁷ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 130.

insisted that his married disciples abide by this ideal. However, it would seem that a tempered and limited application to re-marriage after divorce be considered for this passage in light of Exod 21 and Deut 24.

The most convincing argument for the translation of παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας as “except for adultery” comes from Davies and Allison. Allison says that the translation *except for adultery* exonerated Joseph in Matt 1 from wanting to divorce his wife on suspicion of adultery, keeping him *just* (or *righteous*) in accordance with Matthew’s description in chapter 1. They add, “To make a man who marries a divorced woman guilty of adultery is quite foreign to Jewish law and introduces a rigidity alien to it.”⁴⁸ If a woman were unlawfully divorced (for a cause other than πορνεία), then she was not free to remarry and forced to commit adultery by remarrying in order to survive. Jesus was

⁴⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 533. But see Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 160, 164, 166 who says that Christ’s words in Matt 5.21-32—and Luke 16.18’s wording—seem directed at Herod Antipas and Herodias when compared to Josephus’ *Antiquities* 18.110-12. Matt 5.32’s ἀπολελυμένην is likely in the reflexive middle to refer to Herodias who initiated her own divorce. Thus, like Herod lusted after his niece, divorced his wife on insufficient grounds, then remarried to his niece, he was not only guilty of adulterating in his heart, but of doing so even with a divorce certificate. He further states that the omission of the exception phrases and anything else implicit or obvious to the discussion is inconsequential since any Jewish audience would have understood them to be part of the discussion. One can see this assumed understanding at work when reading the Jerusalem Talmud as a discussion on the Mishnah. The sayings in Matt 5.31-32 and Luke 16.18 resemble the abbreviated accounts in the Jerusalem Talmud. Therefore, only those things that differentiated one’s teaching from another were preserved; any similarities were omitted and understood to be a part of the argument. Matt 5.27-32 was one antithesis consisting of two parts; adultery and divorce where Christ dealt with the seventh and tenth Commandments, which was John, the Baptist’s criticism of Antipas in Matt 14. In 5.27-30, Jesus presented a view of evil, which helped his disciples implement their vocation. These verses upheld the law since the one who did not lust did not commit adultery. Adultery is caused by one’s own inner lustful disposition for which disciples must take responsibility, and be mindful that this lustful disposition may be responsible for other people’s adultery when it comes to divorce. The remedy is both drastic sacrifices and the renunciation of favourite activities. For more on this last point, see Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 116; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 522ff; France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 121ff; Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 80; David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 120.

then asserting an ideal to disturb contemporary complacency, rather than laying down the law.⁴⁹ Indeed, Jesus did not seem to be a legislator in the synoptics.

Matthew's first narrative in his gospel is one about divorce where God intervened to ensure marriage, and Christ's first teachings in Matthew are about relationships, not least of which were sexual conduct and marriage. Anyone reading Matthew 5 will notice that it is the first time divorce was mentioned since the opening episode, and that Christ's statements in this gospel conveniently exonerate his father as a righteous man for having contemplated divorcing Mary. The exception phrase is therefore necessary to the unity of this gospel.

Conclusion

Matt 5's exception phrase was communicated in hyperbole and couched in a greater discourse on how Matthew's Christian community was to behave. Their relationships were to be based upon a high standard set by Christ himself, which did not mimic the world around them. They were to keep their oaths, love each other, and be committed to each other in their marital bonds. Hence, Joseph was a righteous man for wanting to divorce Mary, and he remained so upon taking her for a wife despite the appearances of adultery. The point of the exception phrase in chapter 5 was to iterate what was taken for granted in Matthew's Jewish community (i.e. re-marriage upon divorce) while making two points: 1) that men could adulterate against their wives, and 2) that marriage was to be permanent. The divorced, then, were not condemned to

⁴⁹ Cf. Down, "The Sayings of Jesus.", 333

perpetual celibacy according to this verse. Chapter 3 will bear this in mind as it turns to the exegesis of the exception phrase in Matt 19.

CHAPTER 3

MATT 19.1-8

In a final push for proper background information to the controversial exception phrase in 19.9, Matt 19.1-8 needs to be examined. These verses place Jesus across the Jordan, in hostile territory where Herod's ex-wife likely lived (see below), and likely restricts the breadth of 19.9's application given the specificity of the Pharisees' questions. A brief overview of Matt 14.1-12 is in order prior to tackling Mat 19.1-8 itself since the directive in the latter is likely directed at the characters in the former. Jesus was here making a pronouncement on the permanency of marriage, not stating what is the right cause for divorce.

Matthew 14.1-12

Matthew highlighted five cases of suspected sexual indiscretion in his genealogy to prove that God worked in mysterious ways to secure the Davidic line. His sixth case was a gruesome one that needs be studied to understand not only its foreshadowing of Christ's suffering, but its play in the exception phrase in 19.9. Matthew compared Davidic kingship with Herodian kingship by acknowledging that there was murder and sexual impropriety in both, yet the difference was in each lineage's attitude towards Yahweh's law.

The rampant and complex incest of the Herodian dynasty made enemies amongst the Jews, especially since the royal house behaved as though they were above Jewish

Law. The case of Herodias was mentioned in both Matthew and Mark since it cost John the Baptist his head (Mark 6.14-32). Herodias married her uncle Philip and bore him Salome, whilst her uncle Herod married the Nabatean King Aretas' daughter. Herodias then left her uncle Philip for her uncle Herod. This was already contrary to Lev 18.16 and 20.21. Herod's Nabatean wife got wind of what happened, so she returned home to her father Aretas, whose armies promptly defeated Herod's.¹ Josephus considered her remarriage to be against Jewish Law since her divorced husband was still alive.²

John the Baptist assumed that Yahweh's law was to be obeyed by all in the land,³ which earned him the ire of Herodias, who wanted him promptly executed. Her uncle/spouse Herod wanted John dead, too, but he knew better than to antagonise the people by killing one whom the crowds regarded as a prophet, so he imprisoned him instead. Josephus claimed that John the Baptist was imprisoned for his popularity, and that he was accused of sedition (*Ant.* 18.5.4.). Matthew, on the other hand, claimed that he was imprisoned because he spoke out against the royal remarriage. These two views are easily reconciled; John speaking out against the so-called King and Queen's nuptials was suspicion of sedition.

The story of sexual indiscretion in the Herodian household continued with a little girl of 12 -14 years performing a lascivious dance before her great-uncle/step-father's

¹ This summary is found in Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 370.

² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.5.4 in Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, ed. William Whiston, New updated ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987).

³ France says, "John's remarks may have been a campaign against Antipas for having broken Orthodox Jewish rules." France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 234.

guests at his birthday celebration.⁴ Mounce believes that the “Greek τῷ κορασίῳ (*little girl*) in verse 11 may be somewhat ironic, in that it calls attention to the treachery of using a relatively innocent person in perpetrating such a cruel and violent deed.”⁵ He goes on to say that those who object that it would be unlikely for a girl from the Levant to dance before men at a birthday party ignore the permissive and sexually liberal nature of Herod’s court. Furthermore, they forget that the Herodians did not heed Jewish Law, so it is easy for him to imagine such a thing happening, and the gossip spreading from the palace itself.⁶ Pleased with her performance, Herod the Tetrarch, or perhaps the wine,⁷ made her an offer for up to half of his kingdom. Given the presumed drunkenness in context, one need not logically assess how Herod would have gotten Roman approval to give away half of what Rome allowed him to have. He did it as a grand gesture on his birthday to show off.⁸ If the assumption that Salome was aged 12-14 were correct,⁹ it would be customary for such a young one to inquire as to her mother’s wishes. Showing grotesque disregard for Jewish law, Herod executed John without a trial.¹⁰ The fact that a

⁴ Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary ; v. 33B (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1995), 413; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, vol. 2, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 412.

⁵ Mounce, *Matthew*, 142.

⁶ Mounce iterates: “Although it would have been unusual for a royal princess to perform [a lascivious] dance...in the presence of men, in view of Herodias’ hatred of John [the Baptist] and the drunkenness of the occasion, it is not difficult to believe that that is exactly what happened.” Idem, 141.

⁷ Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 297.

⁸ Matthew likely composed it thus to recall and contrast the same promise made to Esther in Esth 5.6. The parallels between these two stories include a party, drunkenness, a female who pleased the king, and an invitation to request anything up to half of a kingdom. The major contrast between the two was Esther’s request was to save Jewish lives, while Herodias’ was to end a Jewish life.

⁹ Based on the Greek τῷ κορασίῳ.

¹⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 373; France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 234.

man's head could be brought on a platter at a birthday banquet shows how degraded the royal court had become, and how little Jewish Law was regarded in a Jewish land.

Foreshadowing Christ's suffering

Chapter 14 foreshadowed both Jesus' death and Herod's treatment of Jesus. It generalized the point made in 13.54-58 that one will reject Jesus when one views one's familial and social relationships as the basis for one's life. Evil – and even monstrous – behaviour will result from such an attitude because family has taken the place of the father in heaven, thus making it impossible to repent and orient one's life toward the kingdom of God.¹¹

Chapter 14.1-12 is an abbreviation of Mark's account (Mark 6.14-29) that illustrated how the unbelief discussed in the previous chapter (13.37-43; 53-58) begat misunderstanding and violent opposition. It is interesting to note the similarities between Herod, Herodias, and John's story and the story of Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah, namely, the prophet chastising the couple for their disregard for Jewish Law (1 Kgs 18.17). Since this pericope took for granted knowledge of its main characters, it is likely a Palestinian composition.¹² For this paper's purposes, it is important to note Antipas' possible stay in Paraea when all this was happening, where Jesus likely was when asked about divorce in chapter 19.¹³

¹¹ Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 208-209

¹² Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, 464.

¹³ Ibid.

Just like Elijah would speak out against Ahab's injustices, John was unafraid to embody what Christ had said in 10.26-31 by calling out Herod in 14.4. In so doing, Matthew drew a parallel between the malevolent Herod Antipas and the malevolent Jewish leaders who later sought to kill Jesus.¹⁴ So Matthew tried to align this story with preceding verses and later verses, and show that John's fate was that of Christ. Both 13.53-58 and 14.1-12 depicted the tragic lot of a prophet. Like Pilate later, Herod the Tetrarch was brought to execute someone by pressure from those around him (14.9). John prepared a way before Christ (Matt 3.3), was then portrayed as the eschatological Elijah, and like a prophet, he was executed by the wicked, foreshadowing the same fate Christ would suffer, and the same fate the apostles would share. It is no mistake that this pericope has found itself immediately after Matt 13 where Jesus the prophet was rejected.¹⁵ This passage is important for two reasons: 1) it placed the perversity mentioned in the genealogy and on the Sermon on the Mount in contemporary Israel, and 2) it set the scene for chapter 19 where Jesus was likely in an area affected by Herod's divorce and remarriage, hence provoking the questions asked to Jesus in 19.3.

¹⁴ This reached back to Herod the Great in Matt 2. John was there called *a prophet* (ὡς προφήτην), and in 11.9, and in 21.26. Furthermore, it foreshadowed those who sought to kill Jesus by using ἀποκτείνω in 14.5, which was also used in 16.21, 17.33, 21.39-38, and 26.4.

¹⁵ See Davies and Allison, *Matthew 8-18*, 477, for the parallels between John the Baptist's story and Jesus' passion narrative.

Geographical Considerations

A Trip to Herod Antipas' Territory

Chapters 19-25 record Jesus' first trip to Jerusalem as an adult in the gospel of Matthew. Matt 19.1 is a geographical introduction that sets the scene near Herod Antipas' territory, a stop-over on a pilgrimage to Zion.¹⁶ Peter's confession in 16.16 and Jesus' introduction as the prophet from Nazareth (Matt 21.11) intensified the salvific narrative. The opening verse in chapter 19 states that he "came into the region of Judea on the other side of the Jordan." This indicates the region Perea, but since it was not part of Judea proper, the expression served to indicate Jesus' southward movement to Jerusalem via Jericho.¹⁷ Jesus was likely on the east side of the Jordan River.¹⁸

After a sermon on humility and forgiveness in chapter 18, the scene in 19.3 opens in Perea with Jesus trapped in an intra-pharisaic debate on the correct interpretation of Deut 24.1. The debate between Shammai and Hillel, Jesus' previous teachings on the topic in Matt 5, and the Herodias affair in Matt 14 most likely influenced the question. The specific historical background, the way the question was asked, and the Pharisees' unscrupulous motives cautions readers against believing that Jesus was addressing all relevant questions about divorce and remarriage.¹⁹ Perea would have been an area

¹⁶ See Gyöző Vörös, "Machaerus: A Palace Fortress with Multiple Mikva'ot," *BAR* 43.4 (2017), 33 for just how close Herod's palace where Herodias' daughter danced was to Jerusalem. But see Powell who claims that Chapter 19 serves to answer the gentile questions surrounding divorce and entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Verses 1-2, he says, serve only to change the scene and the subject away from ch. 18. Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 159.

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 279; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, vol. 3, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew. ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 7.

¹⁸ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 547.

¹⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 289.

sensitive to Antipas' remarriage to Herodias because he would have first divorced a local princess.²⁰ Jesus was asked the question about the true reasons for divorce in a region where divorce was a hot topic and where, should the Pharisees' trap work, Jesus could lose his influence with the crowds should he pick a side between Hillel and Shammai. The Pharisees' point was the true way to look at divorce.²¹

Hillel and Shammai

The Hillelites thought Deut 24.1-4 was a mysterious phrase with a mysterious meaning, so they concluded that דָּבָר (*a matter*) meant any matter. The Shammaites, who disappeared after the Temple's destruction in 70 AD, disagreed, saying the matter was indecency (*m. Git. 9.10*). Instone-Brewer hastens to add that this Shammaite reason for divorce was in addition to the three others in Exod 21, so their stance should be read in light of the Deut 24 debate, not as all encompassing.²²

The Hillelites required no proof for a divorce, thus a husband could divorce a wife on suspicion of adultery without trial or witness. However, they impeded the distribution of the divorce certificate to slow the process down. The Shammaites required proof prior to granting a divorce as a way to slow it down, but hastened the certificate process. The Hillelite process was largely favoured and was the one that survived the destruction of the temple.²³ Theirs was the righteous way to divorce since it required no witnesses and no trial, thus avoiding the shameful act of having a woman appear in court (*b. Ketubah*.

²⁰ See the section on Matthew 14 earlier in the chapter.

²¹ Carroll D Osburn, "The Present Indicative in Matthew 19:9," *ResQ* 24.4 (1981): 197.

²² Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 114.

²³ *Ibid.*

97b). The Hillelite court needed only three rabbis, scribes, or priests to meet privately with the cuckold to oversee the divorce (*m. Git.* 8.4).

Remarriage was expected upon divorce or widowhood, but it was in this state that women had more rights than ever before, and, should they be able to afford it, would likely remain single. A widow or divorcée could choose almost anyone for a husband save a priest, her former husband, or her adulterous lover (*m. Git.* 9.3). Nevertheless, this was the first time in her life that she would not have her father decide whom she would marry, nor a husband to oversee her finances. The only stigma associated with remarriage was if one's new spouse were an adulterer.²⁴

When the Pharisees approached Jesus, Matthew recorded the superfluous phrase κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν (19.3). Without it, the ensuing debate made no sense, because it was lawful to divorce one's wife. Instone-Brewer says that adding "for any matter" is akin to adding 'of Jesus Christ' when one discusses the Second Coming; it is unlikely to speak of anyone else.²⁵ Jesus, like the Shammaites, disagreed that the Hillelite 'any matter' divorces were valid. Christ began by emphasising the monogamist ideal of Gen 2, and then used its LXX text that emphasised the word *two* since it was not in the Hebrew text (*cf.* Gen 7.9). This made Jesus' exegesis forceful since it emphasised Yahweh's creative act of joining male and female together, thus making it the correct one.

²⁴ Ibid., 117.

²⁵ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*.

The Importance of Jerusalem

Matthew made Jesus a Judean by birth who was forced to wander away from Jerusalem by a jealous king. All the while, the gospel's geographical goal is the city.²⁶ Blomberg says that Matthew saves Jesus' time in Jerusalem for the end of his gospel because "for him Jerusalem stands for the majority of Jews who have rejected Christ and for the climax of official hostility against Jesus, which leads to his death."²⁷ Jesus was leaving Galilee and headed toward Jerusalem (and death) when he was approached in Perea about divorce and remarriage, the place where his cousin had been beheaded over the issue. John the Baptist's fate in 14.1-12 foreshadowed Christ's, so these chapters (19-26) share an impending sense of doom, because both Jesus and the Jewish leaders will be condemned. As hostilities mount, Jesus taught his disciples to be lowly and servile, rather than seek power and prestige.

The Pharisees' Question

It is clear that Christ's interlocutors were not seeking a lengthy discourse on the valid reasons for divorce. Instead, Matthew uses the trip south to remind his readers of the land's sexual improprieties, and to foreshadow Christ's rejection in Jerusalem. Matt 19.3's κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν sets up the exception phrase in 9, and it recalls Jesus' temptations from 4.1-11, so Matthew's narrative cautions readers against expecting a

²⁶ The book of Samuel uses this Jerusalem symbolism as well when David was forced to leave the city on account of Absalom's rebellion (2 Sam 15).

²⁷ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 289.

calm consideration of every aspect of marriage and divorce.²⁸ Blomberg continues: “The context is polemical; Jesus’ reply will have to avoid the trap, whatever other issues it may leave untouched... The setting makes the occasional nature of Jesus’ teaching inescapable.”²⁹ It is also possible that Jesus being invited to weigh in on a contemporary debate between Hillel & Shammai about the reasons to divorce (see above).³⁰ Readers must remember that the religious leaders had set a trap here like later in 22.15-22, so Jesus acted as though the Pharisees had not understood him.³¹

The contemporary notion of divorce was the right of every Jewish man to repudiate his wife with no possibility of appeal. The Pharisees’ question concerning the lawfulness of divorce κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν meant *for any reason* because πᾶσαν in the singular meant *every kind of*, which suggested that Matthew understood this discussion as driving at the question of whether a man could simply pick a reason for divorce out of the air and act upon it.³² In short, was divorce without just cause permissible? No one argued against divorce; rather, they quarrelled over what constituted grounds for divorce. The

²⁸ For the set up to the exception phrase, see Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 347; Carmen Bernabé Ubieto, “Of Eunuchs and Predators: Matthew 19:1-12 in a Cultural Context,” *BTB* 33.4 (2003): 128–34. Bernabé believes that it presented two different interpretations to Deut 24.1 in Matthew’s community. For the recall of the temptations, see Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy,” 163.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 280. Sigal figures that the Jews who approached Jesus seeking to *test* (πειράζοντες) him may have been seeking to resolve an on-going divorce dispute in the village. Or they were simply doing what was customary of any Jew welcoming an itinerant proto-rabbi in their hometown: they asked him an interpretive question in regards to the day’s reading in the synagogue. Phillip Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth According to the Gospel of Matthew* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 90.

³¹ Geldard argues that the Pharisees knew full well that Jesus proclaimed marriage to be indissoluble, and that Jesus knew they did. Jesus chose to walk into the trap in order to re-affirm the indissolubility of marriage. Mark Geldard, “Jesus’ Teaching on Divorce: Thoughts on the Meaning of Porneia in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9,” *Chm* 92.2 (1978): 135.

³² David Janzen, “The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: An Approach from the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Culture,” *JSNT* 80 (2000): 78

context here was a public debate where Jesus responded to a challenge to interpret Deut 24.1-4 where he was bound to offend someone with his answer.³³ In any event, Jesus was called upon to comment on a dispute regarding divorce in the region where Antipas and Herodias had their affair.³⁴

Quoting the Old Testament

Quoting Genesis

In verse 3, Jesus was likely being asked to give his opinion on the meaning of עֲרוֹת דָּכָר, to see if he held to the more liberal Hillel interpretation or to the stricter Shammaite position. Instead of agreeing with a rabbi, Jesus used disputation to side with Yahweh on the issue, proving himself authoritative on the matter. What Moses said later in Torah was to be interpreted in the light of creation, which preceded it. Sexuality is a divine ordinance to be exercised in monogamous relationships. Instead of offending some like the Pharisees had hoped, Jesus rejected every other interpretation. He called all who heard him to respect the scriptures that described marriage as a binding union like it was at creation, which did not allow marriage to be dissolved at the whim of the male.³⁵ Jesus made it clear when he drew on the creation account in Genesis that the union at that time

³³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 480. Thomas Fleming believes it was a Shammaite who approached Jesus in order to solicit a powerful ally against Hillel. Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," 107.

³⁴ Some of those who believe that this had to do with Hillel and Shammai are: Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*; André Feuillet, "L'indissolubilité Du Mariage et Le Monde Féminin D'après La Doctrine Évangélique et Quelques Autres Données Bibliques Parallèles," *ScrTh* 17.2 (1985): 415–61; Fleming, "Christ and Divorce"; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*; Mounce, *Matthew*; Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth*; and James J Young, "New Testament Perspectives on Divorce Ministry," *PP* 33.3 (1985): 205–16.

³⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 480, 481.

was to be exclusive and unbreakable. Jesus then radically re-contextualized divorce by making it the human undoing of something God had done (v. 6).

Jesus reminded his interlocutors that marriage was to be permanent, involving a man and a woman transferring their allegiance from their parents to each other and engaging in sexual relations together. The Greek τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν meant at once *hardness of heart* toward God and fellow humans. Instone-Brewer points out that never had it meant *sinfulness* in any extant context.³⁶ Jesus was highlighting those laws where God's will is made known, and those laws that respond to human sin, which may have been forgotten by the Pharisees. Conformity to the will of God as He expressed it from the beginning is what is necessary.³⁷ Blomberg points out that the future tense of καταλείψει in verse 5 is not a prediction of how people *will* behave but an edict on how they *ought* to.³⁸ Verse 6, in context, cannot suggest that some marriages are inordained of Yahweh because He wanted all of them to be permanent. Since marriage is a covenant, it can be broken; it is not a “mystical union that remains even after divorce.”³⁹ Divorce, because of hardness of heart, breaks a unique holy union, which God has designed from the beginning. By quoting scripture first, Jesus was portrayed as one who had come to fulfil the law, and the Pharisees were forced to contemplate the issue of monogamy prior to the issue of divorce. Since Gen 1.27 could have been interpreted as anti-polygamous,

³⁶ Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 144.

³⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 14.

³⁸ Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy,” 166, emphasis his.

³⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 290.

Jesus further quoted Gen 2.24 to imply an anti-divorce stance.⁴⁰ Davies and Allison mention that καὶ εἶπεν likely referenced *the creator* as the speaker, so Jesus was keen to use the created order as a guide for the moral order.⁴¹ Moreover, in light of Mal 2.15-16 where Yahweh commanded not to betray the wife of one's youth, Deut 24.1 was subordinate to the creation story, which explained God's ideal, and why He hates divorce.⁴² In the end, though, divorce breaks a unique holy union, which God had designed at the beginning.

Deuteronomy's Divorce Certificate

The Pharisees thought they had Jesus trapped, so they pounced with the authority of Moses (ἐνετείλατο) to write a certificate of divorce to allow the divorcée to remarry. A written certificate made divorce difficult by lengthening the process and letting cooler heads prevail.⁴³ It was shown previously how it was actually used to give women the freedom to remarry and to remain so.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it reverses the divine order, which is to marry and create something new, just like it was for Adam and Eve.

⁴⁰ Jesus further insinuated that pre-Mosaic Jews fulfilled the law better than those who'd inherited was insulting but nothing new. Cf. Manfred R Lehmann, "Gen 2:24 as the Basis for Divorce in Halakhah and New Testament," *ZAW* 72.3 (1960): 263–67.

⁴¹ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 11.

⁴² Jesus was intimately familiar with the biblical text (or at least Matthew was) when, "In the reference to Deuteronomy 24:1, Matthew had not just followed Mark. His 'give' for Mark's 'write' shows a knowledge of the OT ('he gives [ἵνα/δώσει] it into her hand')—although assimilation to Matthew 5:31 is also possible." Ibid., 13.

⁴³ Mounce, *Matthew*, 482; Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 548.

⁴⁴ See chapter 2.

Genesis' One Flesh

The meaning of *one flesh* [σάρκα μίαν] is debated and variegated. Perhaps its meaning is the crux of interpretation for the exception phrases, yet, as will be shown, it is usually mentioned in passing as a description for marriage, but not its end result. Davies and Allison say that σάρκα μίαν is unclear, but it seemed to denote a kinship bond akin to flesh and bone between two individuals.⁴⁵ William Heth said that σάρκα μίαν meant *blood kinship* that always remained despite divorce, so Jesus never allowed remarriage.⁴⁶ Leon Morris has a similar stance when he writes that καὶ ἔσονται οἱ δύο εἰς σάρκα μίαν referred to the sexual act that intimately unites spouses, and that there is nothing casual about marriage.⁴⁷ Blomberg echoes the sexual interpretation of this passage: σάρκα μίαν focused on sexual union but was not limited to it. "It incorporates every aspect of intimacy and interdependence which should ideally render the married couple a unified entity at the deepest levels of interpersonal communion."⁴⁸ Jay Adams, Paul Steele, and Charles Ryrie subscribe to a more romantic reading by saying that σάρκα μίαν meant interpenetrated lives that become a single, functioning unit.⁴⁹

Bruce Kaye says that *one flesh* harkened back to Adam's וּבָשָׂר מִבָּשָׂרִי from Genesis 2.23. Marriage is a new unity, which transcends blood relationships despite the fact that it creates them. *One flesh* is only ever used in Gen 2.24 in the Hebrew Bible, so it never penetrated Israel's moral concept. Rather, it was reflective of the author's perceived

⁴⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 11-12.

⁴⁶ William A Heth, "The Meaning of Divorce in Matthew 19:3-9," *Chm* 98.2 (1984): 143.

⁴⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 481.

⁴⁸ Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 167.

⁴⁹ Jay Edward Adams, Paul E Steele, and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, "Point and Counterpoint: Are Divorce and Remarriage Ever Permissible," *FJ* 3.6 (1984): 16.

marital ideal; it was not what one would say about marriage all of the time. The interpretation of *one flesh* in the New Testament was diverse since each author tried to apply it to his own situation, always assuming an ideal for marriage was found in Gen 1 and 2. Also, not all New Testament discussions about marriage drew upon Gen 1 and 2, so *one flesh* is one term among many to indicate unity in common service to Yahweh in light of Messiah's love for humankind.⁵⁰

It is clear that the term was ambiguous even to Jews, and that romance, closeness, and marital ideal are the favoured modern interpretations of the term. One possibility for the limited usage of *one flesh* in the Holy Bible was because it simply referred to children. It was thus secondary to the way a man and a woman ought to relate to each other within a marriage, which was this exclusive relationship between the two that was unlike any other social relationship within the Israelite community. This would explain why it was merely used once in the Old Testament and why it was never a major part of any marital discussion; the author of the book of Genesis acknowledged the presence of children in a marriage but, recognizing that a couple cannot procreate indefinitely, the author went on to describe the ideal of marital relations between men and women amongst themselves defined not as parents, but as partners. Because there was mention of kinship, and procreation is where kinship is perpetuated, the author of Genesis merely wanted to acknowledge in passing the presence of children within a marriage, but then shifted the focus away from bloodlines and towards an ideal way of relating to each other as man and wife.

⁵⁰ Kaye, "One Flesh' and Marriage," 48-49.

Discourse on עֲרֻת דָּבָר

The Pharisees in Matt 19.7 refer to Deut 24.1-4 where Moses conceded that divorce might be permitted. The debated saying, עֲרֻת דָּבָר, is likely what they had in mind in 19.3 when they asked Jesus to weigh in on the reasons for a divorce. Jesus took exception to Pharisaic interpretation of Deut 24.1-4 as a passage about divorce rather than it being about protecting women.⁵¹ This was why he introduced a new way of walking with the Lord based on Yahweh's intentions since the dawn of human creation. Jesus corrected the Pharisees by pointing out that divorce was never commanded; it was only permitted because of men who were unresponsive to the will of God. What separated Christ from the Pharisees was that he refused to allow concessions made on account of human sinfulness to become divine principles.⁵² That was why those testing Jesus read Moses' teaching in Deut 24.1 as a commandment, but Jesus read it as a concession. So the Pharisees were challenging the words of the creator God with the teachings of Moses, rejecting God's will and his action, rendering them unable to distinguish between good and bad.⁵³

The Pharisees' objective was to compromise Jesus so that they could accuse him before Herod Antipas. Christ adroitly bypassed their trap by provoking them to pronounce their position on the Deut 24 debate.⁵⁴ Jesus cleverly turned the trap on the Pharisees by making them choose between God, who is the originator of marriage, and

⁵¹ Robert H Stein, "Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife," *JETS* 22.2 (1979): 117.

⁵² France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 281.

⁵³ Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 264-266.

⁵⁴ Branden, "Mt. 19,1-12: Dans Une Perspective Historique," 68.

Moses, who never commanded divorce but only permitted it.⁵⁵ Moses conceded to divorce even though it was undesirable, but his concession was for something that was possible. A marriage is contingent on the faithfulness of both parties. Jesus never argued with the logic of the Pharisees that there was a proper procedure for divorce, nor with their presupposition that there were grounds for divorce. In fact, he granted them their argument in verse 8.⁵⁶ To answer the Pharisee's question, Jesus went beyond the debate surrounding Deut 24.1-4 to the creation ordinance. *Haven't you read* [Οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε] in verse 4 was a challenge to the Pharisaic understanding of scripture (cf. Matt 12.3, 5). With his answer, Jesus proved himself a superior interpreter of scripture because he sided with the everlasting God who had instilled marriage from the beginning, and whom all Israelites were supposed to obey diligently.

Although Deut 24.1-4 did not permit remarriage *per se*, it presupposed it when it forbade a woman who had already been divorced and remarried from being remarried to her original husband. The Pharisees may not have been as deceitful as some imagine when one presupposes that God permitted divorce was not farfetched. It was, nevertheless, misguided. Rather than question their logic, Jesus questioned the permanence of Mosaic Law. The law on divorce was given only because men had hard hearts, so Jesus was expecting his followers to be more righteous than the Israelites in Moses' day. By using the word ὑμῶν in 19.8, Jesus dissociated himself from those whom

⁵⁵ Osburn, "The Present Indicative," 199.

⁵⁶ Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy." 170.

he was indicting.⁵⁷ He was making it clear that neither he nor any of his followers were to be like those whom he indicted.⁵⁸

Christ's contemporary rabbis approached Deut 24.1 with a loose interpretation that had not transcended the sin of adultery. Jesus' interpretation of Deut 24.1 brought divorce into focus by asserting a major principle found in two Genesis texts that took precedence over a secondary text in Deuteronomy because the latter did not establish any principle, but merely limited divorce. There were at least two competitive attitudes towards divorce: one in line with Mal in 2.16, and the other calling for easy divorces. Judaism at that time was not monolithic, so Christ's proclamation would not be condemned. Jesus' interpretation dignified women by eliminating polygamy and making men who slept with single women guilty of adultery against the women just like a wife who slept with a bachelor would have been against a man. There may have been diversity and flexibility in first century divorce particularly between Palestinian women (who could not divorce their men) and Alexandrian women (who could divorce their men, *The Papyri at Elephantine*, COS 3.76).⁵⁹ Jesus' views were stricter than—and independent of—his contemporaries. It would seem that, to him, neither Hillel nor Shammai were

⁵⁷ Ibid. 292.

⁵⁸ So, according to Sigal, Jesus' proposed a new *halakah* by exegeting עֲרוֹת דָּבָר in the strictest sense possible in the spirit of Mal 2.14-16, that divorce may only happen for πορνεία, which was עֲרוֹת דָּבָר's euphemistic meaning, yet different from Shammai's view. In a typical midrashic exercise, he says, Jesus affirmed God's role in coupling men and women into an indissoluble union, and that divorce and remarriage is adultery just like Malachi said. Divorce happens only because God's design is awry. Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth*, 91.

⁵⁹ But see McDonnell who concludes that women in Rome's middle republic did not have the right to divorce without a man's consent, be it her father or her tutor. Husbands, meanwhile, did. He exegetes Plautus' plays in which divorce is mentioned to prove that they are either referring to divorce in a comedic way, or are referring to Greek, rather than Roman, customs. Myles McDonnell, "Divorce Initiated by Women in Rome: The Evidence of Plautus," *AJAH* 8.1 (1967): 54–80.

close enough to what Moses intended, and so their followers were potentially guilty of adultery.⁶⁰ The standard preserved is that Christ's followers are all called to higher marital standards and commitment than pagans.⁶¹

By taking Deut 24.1-4 into account when trying to understand Jewish views on marriage, one remembers that Gen 2.24 was written in a context when divorce was permissible and marriage was never considered indissoluble. Jesus allowed divorce for reasons of fornication and implied in verse 6 that divorce may be legitimate with his ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωρίζετω, lest one is willing to proclaim his statement redundant.⁶²

The Pharisees suspected Jesus of denying one's right to divorce altogether in verse 7, but Jesus clarified by denying that divorce was Yahweh's will when he instituted marriage. The problem was that the Pharisees understood the legal position but not the spiritual one. Divorce was a concession due to the hardness of human hearts that failed to see the sanctity of marriage. It was not intended to be "a regular part of the matrimonial scene."⁶³ Contemporary Jewish discussions about when divorce was proper or improper

⁶⁰ Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth*, 92.

⁶¹ Since Jesus introduced this new interpretation when he stated in verse 6 ὁ οὖν ὁ θεὸς συνέλεξε ἄνθρωπος μὴ χωρίζετω, James Young argues that Christ's disciples, Matthew and Paul, also introduced new *halakhah* with the exception phrases in Matt 5, 19, and 1 Cor 7.15, respectively, in the light of pagan/Christian marriages. Young, "New Testament Perspectives," 213. There is debate as to how Deuteronomy's *shameful thing* [עֲרֻת דְּבָר] is related to Christ's statements in Matt 19.3-9. A. van den Branden believes that it related to Lev 18.18 whereby close relatives had intercourse. In order not to be accused of reneging on the eternal authority of scripture (which Christ proclaimed in Matt 5.18), Jesus identified with the school of Shammai by insisting that indissoluble monogamy was prescribed from the dawn of human relationships, but Moses had to allow divorce because the Israelites were corrupt. Branden, "Mt. 19,1-12: Dans Une Perspective Historique," 69.

⁶² Kaye, "'One Flesh' and Marriage," 51.

⁶³ Ibid, 483. Scripture does see something wrong with divorce since it had so many restrictions to the general public, and even more restrictions to those in leadership (Lev 18.18; 21.7; Deut 24.4; Ezek 44.22; Mal 2.16). Furthermore, Jesus pointed the fault in the Pharisees' logic when he countered their *command* [ἐνετείλατο] with *permit* [ἐπέτρεψεν]; the only command

were wide of the mark, according to Jesus. Marriage had to be seen in God's light and understood as his will for humanity. Though divorce was permitted, Jesus challenged the assumption that it was what Yahweh intended. The divorce laws were more likely intended to protect the woman rather than to encourage divorce. Craig Evans goes further: "Divorce is tantamount to the undoing of the created order" since Yahweh intended to make them both *one flesh*.⁶⁴ Qumran appealed to Gen 1.27 to make its case against divorce like Christ did, but it went no further (11QTemple 57.17ff; CD 4.20-5.2). Christ sought to highlight that married couples, like Adam and Eve, were *one flesh*, united in something only Yahweh could put together. Thus, it would seem his purpose was to underline the permanency of marriage, not its rightful reasons for dissolution.

Conclusion

Christ and the Pharisees agreed on the primacy of scriptures and on the need to live the divine principles inherent in them. Jesus criticised the Pharisees for reading the scriptures in isolation—rather than in conversation—with the other scriptures. Creation's first principles trumped concessions granted because of human stubbornness. Christ corrected the Pharisees' conceptions of the *moral force* of Deut 24.1-4 by specifying that it was a *concession* rather than a *command*.⁶⁵ Christ nevertheless preserved the divorce

in Deut 24.1-4 was that a man not remarry his divorced and remarried wife. The Greek ἄλλην [*another*] in verse 9 implied any woman, but Jewish law thought that a man might only commit adultery with another man's wife. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 16. Even the community at Qumran banned divorce and remarriage (11QTemple 57.17ff; CD 4.20-5.2). Therefore, throughout the scriptures, divorce was restricted because its authors saw something wrong with it, but the reasons were not always specified.

⁶⁴ Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 347.

⁶⁵ F Scott Spencer, "Scripture, Hermeneutics, and Matthew's Jesus," *Int* 64.4 (2010): 375.

passage and the understanding that divorce was permissible. Christ's approach resisted single proof-texts; he instead grounded ethical reasoning in God's mercy so humans may respond in like fashion. He also qualified textual tensions, and interpreted scripture definitively. One must never attempt to properly interpret Scripture on one's own. Rather, one must do it with an open heart and unity with God's people from the present and ages past, allowing Holy Spirit to continually guide the church through his word and to the fullness of God's truth.⁶⁶ Christ set the precedent in how to correctly understand scripture, and how to correctly apply it, which in this case was to one's marriage.

The scene is set for Jesus' more debated exception phrase in Matt 19.9. Jesus walked into a trap where his cousin had been decapitated right after having preached on human relationships in chapter 18. His interlocutors wanted to know which cause was a legitimate cause to divorce one's wife based on Moses' command in Deut 24.1-4. Jesus, instead, proved that it was a concession by conversing with scripture to interpret scripture. It was noted that Moses' only command in the aforementioned passage was to not re-marry one's divorced, re-married, and twice-divorced spouse. What Yahweh wants from creation based on Gen 1 and 2 is for marriages to be permanent, and what Yahweh wants there trumps what Moses permitted in Deuteronomy. Still, there is no mention of perpetual celibacy for divorcés.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 278.

CHAPTER 4

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN MATT 19.9

This paper moves finally to the crux of the matter regarding the fate of the divorced. Matt 19.9 has a similar saying to Matt 5.32 about them. There is debate, however, as to why the two phrases are different. Matt 5.32 uses a common and straight-forward exception phrase, whilst Matt 19.9's is seemingly ambiguous and strangely constructed. This debate will lead the discussion.

The Exception Words

μη ἐπί

Blomberg believes that μη ἐπί should be taken as a genuine exception that Mark takes for granted. He says that what Matthew was doing was merely spelling out several parts of Jesus' dialogue more fully for his largely Jewish-Christian audience.¹ Mark presupposed these, and then both supported women's rights.² In other words, Jesus was saying that men could adulterate against their wives, which was a revolutionary idea for his time.

Davies and Allison are categorical that μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ [Matt 19.9] was the equivalent of παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας [Matt 5.32].³ Where they are uncertain is whether

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 292. See also Branden who claims that the Greek μη ἐπί always introduced an exception in classical and Koiné Greek (Gen 43.4, LXX). Branden, "Mt. 19,1-12: Dans Une Perspective Historique," 75.

² Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 173.

³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 18. See also B Byron, "The Meaning of 'Except It Be for Fornication',", *ACR* 40.2 (1963): 91, who sees it as their natural meaning.

or not *μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* modified only the first verb (*ἀπολύση*) or both (*γαμήση*). Mahoney, on the other hand, is certain that *μη* negates *ἐπὶ*, which indicates a state or cause if followed by the dative. Thus, he concludes, *μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* modified *divorce* only.⁴

Thomas Fleming argues that *ἐπὶ* was causal and not final. The *μη* distinguished between two categories of divorce: because/not because of adultery.⁵ André Feuillet follows this train of thought with his own observations. He says that *μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* meant *fornication* and that it formed an exception phrase. It was tied to motives for divorce in Deut 24.1, rather than Lev 18.16. So, this phrase had nothing to do with an illegitimate marriage.⁶

Guenther, however, believes that it should be read as exclusionary. He has observed that there were a high proportion of occurrences of *μη ἐπὶ* to *εἰ μη ἐπὶ* or *ἐάν μη ἐπὶ*, that in each occurrence of the latter two *εἰ* and *ἐάν* functioned as subordinating conjunctions, and that it was the constructions with *εἰ* that were translated by *except*, while constructions with *ἐάν* were translated by *unless*. There were no other constructions that yielded these translations or carried an exceptive meaning, so, by itself, *μη ἐπὶ* did not bear an inclusive meaning.⁷ In other words, *μη ἐπὶ* without the conditional conjunction did not mean *except*. He continues:

The preposition *ἐπὶ* with the dative occurs with the effect of introducing the person or thing because of which something exists or happens. When this use of *ἐπὶ* is negated (as in *μη ἐπὶ*), it means the author is introducing the thing because

⁴ Mahoney, “New Look at the Divorce Clauses,” 31. See also Heth, “The Meaning of Divorce,” 142.

⁵ Fleming, “Christ and Divorce,” 110.

⁶ Feuillet, “L’indissolubilité Du Mariage,” 435.

⁷ Guenther, “The Exemption Phrases,” 86. But see Branden who argues the opposite. Branden, “Mt. 19,1-12: Dans Une Perspective Historique, 75,” note 1 above, and Byron, “The Meaning of,” 91.

of which something does not exist or happen, namely, that which is excluded as an occasion or cause...It does not mean 'except' as it has traditionally been interpreted. Had the Gospel writer wanted to introduce an exception, he would have used εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ or ἐάν μὴ ἐπὶ.⁸

This meant that Jesus had to have been introducing something new, lest Matthew chose his words carelessly.

James M. Weibling suggests that Jesus stated Yahweh's intent for marriage in language easily understood by his contemporaries; he was not introducing an exception nor was he giving credence to Jewish cultural norms with an exception phrase. He was, instead, insinuating that adultery might be committed against wives. Thus, Matt 19.9 was a bi-conditional—not an exception—phrase written by one who chose his words carefully so that his readers might know the heart of God and know that his law does not usually accommodate cultural laws.⁹

Marcus Bockmuehl disagrees because the exception phrases were necessary in Matthew's pre-rabbinic culture that forbade the reunion of spouses divorced for reasons of infidelity. Indeed, the death penalty for adultery suggested that these marriages were never to be restored. So there was a tradition of interpreting Deut 24's *shameful thing* [עֲרֻת דָּבָר] as extending to adultery (Abraham's prayer in 1QapGen 20.15 and David's 10 concubines in 2 Sam 15.16, 16.22, 20.3). He says that there was a pre-rabbinic exegetical tradition demanding that conjugal unions be severed for adultery and rape that Matthew was indebted to uphold, thus the necessity of the exception phrases.¹⁰ It is therefore

⁸ Ibid., 94-95.

⁹ Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark," 229.

¹⁰ Markus N A Bockmuehl, "Matthew 5:32, 19:9 in the Light of Pre-Rabbinic Halakhah," *NTS* 35.2 (1989): 295.

shown that the majority agree that μη ἐπί is an exception, but to what it is an exception is debatable.

The Greek μοιχᾶται in the present tense

Given the discussion about divorce, it is important to note that the present indicative mood in Matt 19.9 does not necessarily denote continuity like the imperfect. Indicative present in the New Testament is usually a *descriptive present* and such is the case in Matt 3.11 (continual baptising?), 8.25 (continual perishing?), 13.14 (continual buying?), as well as the following: 13.44; 20.30; 26.40, 63; 27.38. Where there was continuity, the continuity did not rise from the present indicative.¹¹ Jesus discussed a general truth by using a *gnomic present* much as he used it in 7.17, which did not suggest continuity. Carroll Osburn explains:

The use of ἄν with a relative clause followed by the present indicative μοιχᾶται in Matthew 19:9 means only that whenever and as often as the situation mentioned in the protasis occurs, adultery is committed in that act each time it occurs. This idiomatic construction does not necessitate continuity being involved in the apodosis; rather, it specifies that with each repetition of the protasis, there is a concomitant recurrence of the apodosis.¹²

The present indicative tense of the Greek μοιχᾶται (*adultery*) was not progressive; it was a proverbial statement rather than a perpetual action, because adultery occurred at the time of divorce. It was understood as a lust for other commitments or another life.¹³

¹¹ For example: 10.38; 14.2; 15.23 (imperfect tense); 17.15 (*often*). Osburn, “The Present Indicative,” 195; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 516-17, 526, 529.

¹² Osburn, “The Present Indicative,” 203.

¹³ Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy,” 175.

Continuity may or may not be involved, but, as has been shown, it is illegitimate to appeal to the Greek present indicative to assert that it must be involved.

The Indissolubility of Marriage according to Gordon Wenham and William Heth

Two of the most outspoken scholars arguing against all remarriage are Gordon Wenham and William A. Heth.¹⁴ They believe that the construction of 19.9 (two verbs plus an exception) is unique to the Bible and begs the question: *Does the exception qualify both verbs or just one?* Wenham prefers giving grounds to nullifying marriages rather than permitting divorces, though it suffers from ascribing a narrow meaning to πορνεία when the term is popularly believed to be a catch-all. He says that the only way to make the flow of argument in 19.3-12 coherent is to say that divorce is adulterous unless divorce is for πορνεία, else divorce and remarriage is always adulterous. So, according to him, Jesus was reaffirming his own views from 5.32, and his hard line explained the disciples' reaction. Matthew repeated himself with abbreviated sentences, but there were several conditional relative clauses in Matthew that, although not identical, shed light as to how Matthew wanted to be understood. The second verb in Matt 19.9 was unnecessary to the meaning of the sentence since the meaning of the verse could very well be *to divorce is to commit adultery*, leaving *remarriage* out. Wenham argues that Matt 4.9, 5.19, 7.24, 10.14, 18.3, & 21.21 all have redundant second verbs that are

¹⁴ William A. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985); Heth, "The Meaning of Divorce." Gordon J Wenham, "The Syntax of Matthew 19:9," *JSNT* 28 (1986): 17–23.; Gordon J. Wenham et al., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: 3 Views*, Counterpoints series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 19-42.

unnecessary to the meaning of the phrase. In some cases (5.19, 7.24 & 10.14) the exception applies to one verb only. Matt 7.21 shares 19.19's semantic structure but would have minimised the seriousness of divorce, so Matthew chose a different structure for the latter that preserved the gravity of the situation. Remarriage and divorce are aligned on the axis of *wrongness*, Wenham says, with the former always being adulterous whilst the latter was normally adulterous except for *πορνεία*. Both were breaches of the seventh commandment and the emphasis of the attack on both adultery and divorce in 5.27-32 was preserved in Matthew's grammatical structure for 19.9.¹⁵

Heth, likewise, affirms the indissolubility of marriage and Christ's prohibition to remarriage.¹⁶ He says that it is difficult to say that Jesus allowed remarriage on account of sexual sin when the *God-joined one flesh* union remained between the original couple. The exception clauses¹⁷ were not used to accept the mores of the day calling an adulterous wife to be divorced, nor were they there to provide a legitimate reason for divorce; they were there to exonerate those disciples who felt pressured to divorce an unfaithful spouse due to the days' cultural mores. In other words, Jesus would not hold his followers guilty of breaking his precept of no divorce should they divorce on account of the punishable sin of adultery. Verses 10-12 were extensions and confirmations of the teaching of the indissolubility of marriage.

This position has solicited a slew of responses. That there are so many counter-arguments testifies to Heth and Wenham's influence upon the topic at hand, so it is

¹⁵ Wenham, "The Syntax of Matthew 19:9," 17.

¹⁶ Heth, "The Meaning of Divorce," 144.

¹⁷ He does not call them *phrases*.

important to summarise some of them. Duane Warden agrees with Wenham.¹⁸ He says that Jesus' words on divorce each had a different focus: Luke's (the shortest and least contextualised) focused on the husband's remarriage, Mark's paid attention to sin committed by—and against—the woman, whilst Matt 5 was twofold; 1) to introduce three new concepts of adultery that forbade contemporary interpretations of the seventh commandment, and 2) to call for husbands to have compassion over their financially insecure wives. Matt 19's *κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν* made his context legalistic. More radical than Shammai, Jesus suggested that a woman might be adulterated against. "Jesus refused to concede that in sexual matters the conduct of a man was to be regarded differently from the conduct of a woman. A married man who had sexual relations with any woman not his wife was guilty of adultery."¹⁹ The Hebrew *עֶרְוַת* in Deuteronomy literally meant 'nakedness,' so Jesus rightly picked up on the sexual connotations in Matt 5 and 19. Warden points out that nowhere did Matthew mention an innocent party, so Heth and Wenham's conclusions fit the context best and can be consolidated with Luke and Mark's sayings.

The sense that Judea was loose sexually was not lost upon the gospel of Matthew, as has been shown in previous chapters above. The Pharisees may very well have been educated in law, but the disciples were not. What would shock them was a restriction upon their perceived sexual privileges, not a reinterpretation of divorce. Jesus was always concerned with human sinfulness; in order to understand his sayings one must bear in mind that he was constantly looking at sin in the face and demanded that his followers

¹⁸ Duane Warden, "The Words of Jesus on Divorce," *ResQ* 39.3 (1997): 141–53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152–153.

refrain from sin (5:20, 48). His disciples were to persevere through hard times and not give up on their commitments. And they understood that too: the vast majority of them later died to keep their faith.

David Janzen says that, since Wenham can find no exact parallel to this particular syntax in Matthew, his position falls under the rather obvious objection that if Matthew had meant that remarriage under *any* circumstance resulted in adultery he would simply have said so. The more obvious way to understand the exception phrases, says Janzen, is to say that remarriage preceded by divorce not caused by πορνεία was illegitimate since the divorce was not permissible in the first place. The exception phrases were precisely exception phrases: they provided an exception to what was otherwise an absolute prohibition on divorce, but they were concerned only with this matter. There is no compelling reason to take Matthew as prohibiting remarriage absolutely, especially as in both of the texts, notably 19.3-12, the question centres around divorce, not remarriage.²⁰

Philip Wiebe is unconvinced that the positioning of μὴ ἐπὶ in Matt 19.9 was crucial to its logical import. It followed ἀπολύσει τὴν γυναῖκα and comes before ἄλλην because it did not make sense to remarry except for unchastity. Grammatical variations did not necessarily correspond to logical variations, he says. So long as it was translated *except* in English, it will forever mean that one can divorce for reasons of unchastity and remarry without guilt of adultery.²¹

²⁰ Janzen, "The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew," 71, emphasis his.

²¹ Phillip H Wiebe, "Jesus' Divorce Exception," *JETS* 32.3 (1989): 327–33.

Hagner supports Wenham.²² He says that Jesus admitted that divorce was permitted (ἐπέτρεψεν), but that it was not the ideal will of God given that Adam and Eve were to be life-long spouses. Thus, divorce was secondary due to sinfulness. The Greek λέγω ὑμῖν was emphatic and carried the same effect as λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν from 5.32. The exceptive phrase made allowance for the moral sensitivities of Matthew's Jewish-Christian readers. If this phrase were not a true exception, then Matthew would have written μηδέ. Jesus prohibited remarriage, lest the absolute in 19.6 be softened, and the disciples' later statements be inappropriate. Jesus' mission was to restore humanity to the perfection of the Garden of Eden. He articulated the ethics of the kingdom in ideals. Still, it was with hardness of hearts that others forced idealism onto others, reading this passage as a mere collection of laws.²³

Francis J. Moloney notes that the whole of the New Testament taught that the radical demands of Christian discipleship needed to be met within the mysterious context of a disciple who was prepared to lose himself in his openness to the gifts that God alone could give.²⁴ It called for a continual and radical openness to the overpowering presence of God's Lordship in the life of these struggling Christians. This was the sense of the διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν in Matt 19:12. Matthew exhorted the abandoned spouses of his community to live in celibacy because they were so taken up and swept off their feet by the overwhelming presence of God's Lordship that there can be no possibility of

²² Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 549.

²³ *Ibid.*, 550.

²⁴ Francis J Moloney, "Matthew 19:3-12 and Celibacy: A Redactional and Form Critical Study," *JSNT* 2 (1979): 42–60.

committing themselves to a further marriage relationship.²⁵ Moloney further believes that Matthew's community had gentile converts who were not educated in Old Testament morals and who were thus entering the community of believers married to their kin. In order to prevent any laxity, Matthew inserted Jesus' own words to say that it was fine for Christians to divorce their kin.²⁶ However, this position is tenuous, as the positing of a gentile audience goes against the dominant view of Matthean reception.²⁷

David Holwerda applauds *Jesus and Divorce* for appreciating marriage as a covenant, but, since Wenham and Heth recommend that remarried individuals remain together because God has forgiven them, he asks the important question: Does God's forgiveness create a new beginning?²⁸ He disagrees with Heth that *one flesh* makes the couple like siblings, thus making divorce and remarriage as described in Deut 24.1 *incestuous*. Leviticus 18 stated that incest happened when a man married his brother's wife who has had children. Otherwise, it was not incest, which meant that the kinship bond was broken or never existed without a child. Instead, divorce meant that the kinship bond between the first two spouses no longer existed, so remarriage was permissible in the Old Testament. It is the light in which Holwerda believes that Deut 24.1-4 ought to be interpreted, and that was the true backdrop to Matthew's exceptive phrase.²⁹ His review highlights the weaknesses in Heth and Wenham's work, not least of which is a dismissal of all exceptions for remarriage except for their own. In other words, Heth and Wenham

²⁵ Thus the analogous use of εὐνοῦχο. Ibid., 47, 49.

²⁶ That is why Matthew added things that Mark omitted. Ibid., 51-52.

²⁷ For a summary of Matthew reception, see Hagner, *Matthew*, lxiv-lxv.

²⁸ David E Holwerda, "Jesus on Divorce: An Assessment of a New Proposal," *CTJ* 22.1 (1987): 114-20.

²⁹ Ibid., 117.

want their readers to think that Jesus should not be understood as making an exception whereby divorcés could remarry, but that they have the authority to make one themselves, which is hypocritical. The focus in Matt 19.3-9 was the permanency of marriage, not the reasons for divorce. Should Wenham and Heth agree with this, they do not make it clear. Wenham does not take into account the pleonastic nature of Koiné Greek; Matthew's *unnecessary verbs* may very well have been modern verbal currency in his day, so he never would have thought to exclude one verb from the exception phrase and only mean for it to apply to another. It is therefore best to understand that μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ and παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας are both exception phrases.

Interpretations of Matt 19.9

The interpretations for this verse are many. Some scholars discussed below argue that divorce is sometimes permitted whilst others claim divorce is never permitted. Some believe that Jesus allowed remarriage for the innocent party, some argued he never did, while yet more think Jesus was affirming the permanency of marriage. Two scholars posit that Jesus introduced a new ethos, and that the only way to understand this passage is to understand its eschatological undertones. These views are summarised below.

The Text is Ambiguous

Given the aforementioned debate whether the exception phrase is actually an exception, there are some scholars who throw up their arms. Stanley Porter and Paul Buchanan believe that the verse's ambiguities cannot be solved by appealing to logical analysis because logical analysis needs be preceded by linguistic clarity. So, if anyone is

to make sense of the exceptive *phrase*,³⁰ one must study its usage and context, its relation to other contemporary texts, semantics, and linguistic convention in Greek rather than in English.³¹

Likewise, Henri Crouzel says that the text is grammatically difficult to explain, but he claims that it did correspond with Mark and Luke's teaching on divorce in that the remarrying male will commit adultery.³² He believes that Matt 19.9, in a single phrase, summarised 5.32's πορνεία exception phrase and Mark 10's mention of remarriage. The exception phrase was linked to the first proposition since it preceded καὶ, but, grammatically, it could affect the remarriage phrase.

Together, the authors above highlight the text's major issues in interpretation. The authors below each deal with these textual issues differently, with different results. Still, it is important to summarise their theological understanding of the text since theology is not only dealing with the problem, but also finding a solution.

Divorce permitted in cases of adultery, and Joseph was a Righteous Man

Dale Allison is convinced that commentators over the centuries ought to have searched for an inter-textual explanation because Matt 19.9 was a necessary addendum in a Jewish community that assumed sexual impurity would always dissolve a marriage.³³

³⁰ Not *clause* since it is prepositional, they say

³¹ Stanley E. Porter and Paul Buchanan, "On the Logical Structure of Matt 19:9," *JETS* 34.3 (1991): 335–39.

³² Henri Crouzel, "Le Texte Patristique de Matthieu 5:32 et 19:9," *NTS* 19.1 (1972): 98–119.

³³ Dale C Allison, Jr, "Divorce, Celibacy and Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25 and 19:1-12)," *JSNT* 49 (1993): 3–10.

Without the addendum, Matthew would be contradicting the title of *righteous* he bestowed upon Joseph in 1.18-25. With the exception phrase, there was harmony between the passages if πορνεία meant *adultery*. Davies and Allison say that μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ was the equivalent of παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, which justified Joseph in chapter 1, and that divorce is not adultery when the marriage bond has already been broken by unfaithfulness.³⁴ Matthew made Joseph the model for human behaviour according to God's will.³⁵ Matthew's community may have taken for granted that a wife ought to be divorced for sexual indiscretion, so the exceptive phrases were added as a concession. Whether remarriage was permitted, however, cannot be known. So, Matthew's approval of Joseph's reasoning in 1.19 necessitated the exception phrase as corollary to Jesus' teaching on divorce lest his audience believe Jesus was contravening Torah by what Bockmuehl would say was, "condoning sexual misdemeanour under the universal umbrella of an indissoluble marriage bond."³⁶

Nevertheless, 5.32 assumed remarriage, just like the certificate of divorce allowed one to remarry, so Jesus may very well have assumed that divorce led to remarriage. Matt 19.9 indirectly condemned polygamy, which would not have been controversial in Jesus' time since most families were monogamous, with polygamy a rare exception.³⁷ Interestingly, these views centre on the meaning of πορνεία and a way out of marriage rather than focus on the heavy punishment for divorce and remarriage.

³⁴ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 17.

³⁵ Allison, Jr, "Divorce, Celibacy and Joseph.", 4.

³⁶ Bockmuehl, "Pre-Rabbinic Halakhah," 294.

³⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 18.

Divorce and remarriage permitted

Blomberg insists that those who argue that remarriage after divorce is wrong ignore history's dissenting voices and the "growing, unbiblical asceticism, especially in sexual matters, which increasingly pervaded the Greek and Roman church."³⁸ Jesus would have had to be explicit in forbidding all remarriage when his audience took it for granted that remarriage was their right.³⁹ Blomberg posits that *μοιχεῖται* was used in the metaphorical sense in 19.9. What Jesus was saying was that marriage dissolved once sexual disunion was accompanied by a refusal to honour one's commitment. Although people ought to remain married permanently, marriages may be rescinded. The cause of divorce is always hard-heartedness from which Jesus dissociated himself, knowing that Holy Spirit empowered others to compassion and empathy. In all cases, couples ought to seek reconciliation, remain celibate if they are unmarried, and ought to be permitted to remarry even though God's ideal is permanent marriage; nothing completely destroys it, but divorce may be appropriate as a last resort.

Blomberg does not make much of church tradition to interpret the exception phrases, however he buys entirely into church tradition when it comes to the interpretation of the eunuchs (discussed later). Insofar as Jesus having to be explicit, one might counter that Jesus spoke in parables especially so that he would not be completely understood (13.13). Though Blomberg blames hard-heartedness for divorce itself, I

³⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 292.

³⁹ Although there were differences between ancient divorce proceedings and modern ones, both share the crucial feature of a publicly recognized legal dissolution of marriage that is more than an annulment or a geographical separation of individuals. So, just like in modern minds, ancient Jews would have thought marriages cancelled, which would make them single with the right to remarry. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 179-180.

would suggest that it is also a stumbling block to reconciliation. Nevertheless, Blomberg seems to understand that the point of the passage was that marriage was to be thought of as permanent for those who follow Christ, and all was to be done to behave in a way that would ensure its longevity, which was to what Matt 19.9 spoke, rather than to the reasons why one ought to divorce.

Divorce permitted because of adultery; remarriage permitted to the innocent party

Any Jew was free to remarry in the first century, and any unbiased reader of the texts would see in them a natural exception in which infidelity would void the marital bond. So some posit that the innocent party could remarry. This verse, says Weibling, serves to absolve the injured parties for divorcing their spouses, and to release the perpetrators to do what it is they wanted to do.⁴⁰ Matthew sought to reduce to one the causes for divorce in his context because contemporary Jews multiplied reasons for divorce. So he chose infidelity as the sole reason to permit husbands to divorce wives and to remarry. This fit perfectly into a first century Jewish context where remarriage was possible. If one objects that Jesus was not supposed to agree with his detractors, Sabourin says that it is possible that the extant text is “no longer perfectly adapted to the context which originally contained the absolute form of the original formulation.”⁴¹ After all, *Hermas* 4.1.4-10 was the only clear patristic text to prohibit remarriage upon divorcing an adulterous wife. Thus, divorce and remarriage was permitted only in the case of πορνεία. Sigal says that the simplest way to read this text is to understand that Jesus was

⁴⁰ Weibling, “Reconciling Matthew and Mark,” 234.

⁴¹ Leopold Sabourin, “Divorce Clauses, Mt 5:32, 19:9,” *BTB* 2.1 (1972): 84.

opposed to divorce like the prophets Malachi and Jeremiah, that he regarded πορνεία as punitive, and, in order to safeguard God's design of creation, Jesus was opposed to any further licit polygamy.⁴² Mounce might agree when he suggests that God sees remarried individuals as adulterers unless they have divorced for reasons of sexual immorality.⁴³ The first century social situation was such that a marriage could never be maintained in the case of adultery, but Jesus avoided stigmatizing the wife in Matt 5.32 (cf. Deut 22.13), whilst in 19.9, he prohibited remarriage after divorce. Since humans sinned and severed the unity of the flesh envisioned in Gen 2.21, divorce is permitted to allow an innocent party a second chance at marriage.⁴⁴ When the disciples were shocked, Jesus told them that it was difficult to accept what he had just said, that those who divorced must not remarry unless their wives adulterated. Mounce would add that anyone who disobeys is a false disciple.⁴⁵

Eschatological Undertones

Amy-Jill Levine does not like the first century Jewish caricature to which modern scholars adhere, one that vilifies first century Jews as misogynists in order to paint Jesus as the saviour of women.⁴⁶ One is led to believe that Jesus rejected his culture so that he may be the first to treat women with dignity and respect despite the fact that Jesus

⁴² Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth*, 95.

⁴³ Mounce, *Matthew*, 181.

⁴⁴ Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth*, 99.

⁴⁵ Mounce, *Matthew*, 182.

⁴⁶ Amy-Jill Levine, "Jesus, Divorce, and Sexuality: A Jewish Critique," in *Historical Jesus Through Catholic and Jewish Eyes* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000), 113–29.

affirmed traditional gender roles in his parables.⁴⁷ Jesus is instead made out to be egalitarian in his views on sex because no one was supposed to have coitus with anyone other than their spouse.⁴⁸

She laments modern depictions of first century Judaism which are based on: 1) rabbinic rhetoric akin to basing first century Christians to a “group of blind and maimed messianists”, 2) the assumption of social stigma towards divorcées, 3) that divorce was cheap, and 4) that polygamy was disallowed.⁴⁹ This needs be corrected, she states, in order to understand what Jesus meant. Her explanation is worth quoting at length here:

The only view of Jesus’ program that does make sense of the radical pronouncements is that of eschatological prophet. In the context of millenarian piety, family configurations change. A strong sexual ethic is often the hallmark of apocalyptic communities (1 Corinthians and Revelation are instructive), as is the attempt to recreate the golden age. The divorce legislation conforms to all these characteristics.⁵⁰

Jesus’ appeal to Genesis as the golden age was typical millenarian piety, she continues. Jesus’ instructions on divorce are an intensification of Torah based on Torah. Thus, the eschatological context explained the family shift (Cf. Luke 14.20, 26; 18.29; 20.34-36; Mark 10.29-30; Matt. 19.29).⁵¹ Although Jesus appeared as bridegroom, there was no bride, no consummation and, except for the synagogue ruler and his wife (Matt 9.18-26; Mark 5.21-43; Luke 8.40-56), no one in his parables or entourage appeared in the narrative with their spouse. She concludes that “it makes a great deal of sense for

⁴⁷ For example, he expected his disciples spread the gospel without their families to, and only had men in his inner circle

⁴⁸ Levine, “Jesus, Divorce, and Sexuality.”, 113-115.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 119.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁵¹ The last two references in Matthew & Mark may have omitted the Lucan saying because leaving wife may mean *divorce*.

[Jesus] to construct a fictive kinship group or counter-cultural view of marriage and the family” if he were convinced that another way of living was imminent.⁵² Marriage and children were soon to pass away because all were to become like angels in heaven (Matt 22.30). She believes that Jesus disapproved of divorce, but his disapproval of remarriage was greater.

It seems to me that to say divorce was expensive and, thus, prohibitive and not so common in first century Judaism is like saying that divorce is expensive today (which is true) and so not so common in the late 20th and early 21st century (which is false). The cost of divorce has no bearing on its frequency in this age, so one should not assume that it had any effect upon first century marriage. Insofar as Matthew’s gospel was concerned, while it may be true elsewhere that hardly anyone Jesus encountered showed up together with a spouse, the beginning of the gospel of Matthew has a genealogy with five wives/sexual partners listed (1.1-6), Peter has a mother-in-law (8.14), and Pilate’s wife pleaded with him to let Jesus alone (27.19). I think the geographical context had more to do with his response than an eschatological outlook. Jesus was being tested in a place that could get him into a lot of trouble with Herod when he was asked about divorce for any reason. Eschatological or not, he had to respond to a question about divorce. To look to eschatology for an answer would be to deny the real and present danger Jesus faced in this part of the world across the Jordan.

⁵² Levine, “Jesus, Divorce, and Sexuality,” 123.

A New Ethos

Lisa Cahill proposes that Christ was implementing a new ethos with the exception phrases.⁵³ She says that for Christ to speak of marriage in maximalist ideals, that is, as a partnership for life, means it is serious and a good thing to strive for, but it makes it difficult to describe what must be present for a marriage to take place and when a marriage has ceased to be. To insist that divorce is indissoluble is to say that all that remains after divorce is *an abstract legal tie* that has no resemblance whatsoever to the bond with Christ to his church. Jesus' sayings regarding marriage must be taken in the eschatological context of the New Testament views on the Christian life and bear in mind the tensions between kingdom expectations and their fulfilment in the present age. Jesus was communicating a new ethos rather than a new law.⁵⁴

She says that there is no homogeneous praxis to co-ordinate Christ's ideas on divorce, compromising the eschatological nature of Jesus' words. Scripture has no method of determining what the eschatological ideal is for marital unity and indissolubility, and what praxis for the church is at present. Nevertheless, Cahill believes that:

New Testament perspectives on ethics suggest that life within the faith community will be the proving ground for articulation of specific sexual and marital norms, and that adaptive re-articulation of norms best suits the historical, incarnate qualities of human nature and of the "good news" which judges, redeems, and liberates it.⁵⁵

⁵³ Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Sexual Ethics, Marriage, and Divorce," *TS* 47.1 (1986): 102–17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

Jesus' followers were to behave as though marriage were important, as though marriage were a life-long partnership, and they were to renounce cultural norms of divorce and remarriage for anything less than the betrayal of the marital bond. Jesus was not telling his audience what constituted marriage nor was he declaring what dissolved it; he was telling everyone that marriage was to be a dedicated, life-long commitment to what Yahweh had done when the pair united.⁵⁶

Permanency of Marriage

Whilst the Pharisees asked about proper reasons for divorce, Jesus responded with the permanency of marriage. He did not deny that divorce was permitted; his desire was to redirect the discussion from Deuteronomy to Genesis. The one exception Jesus allowed for in this passage was for *fornication*, which was to be interpreted as *adultery* in this case since its context involved married individuals.⁵⁷ It was required for Jews to divorce adulterous women (the original death penalty was no longer enforced), but there is no extant, exhaustive list of when divorce could justifiably take place, and, since it was assumed to be able to take place, Mark and Luke excluded exceptions from their gospel. Jesus was illustrating the permanency of marriage to an audience that understood it as temporary. He was not defining when divorce may or may not take place.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Cahill's view is endearing, but incomplete because the term σάρκα μίαν remains unexplored. I believe that the term is the key to understanding Yahweh's συνέζευξεν (*putting together*) which undergirds what she has called Christ's *new ethos*.

⁵⁷ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 483-484.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

James Weibling is convinced that Jesus' teachings on divorce were included in Matthew and Mark to curtail the first century's high divorce rates, though each teaching was abridged to make a desired point. Modern interpreters repeat the same mistake as the Pharisees of old when they seek to legitimise divorce; rather, they ought to focus on the permanency of marriage. Otherwise, one would have to concede that Christ approved of a hard-hearted man divorcing his repentant adulterous wife.⁵⁹

There are three ingredients to marriage according to Weibling: 1) leaving one's parents, 2) cleaving to a spouse, and 3) sexual union. Anyone disinterested in remaining sexually pure towards one's spouse violated the *cleave* part. A high view of marriage did not inflict wounds (like celibacy and accusations) upon divorcées because love is steadfast, not legalistic. Christ's followers are called away from a hard-hearted devotion to themselves and toward wholehearted faithfulness (cleaving) to Yahweh, which would inevitably lead to cleaving to one's spouse with whom Yahweh has joined together. Nevertheless, Jesus was purposefully enigmatic to avoid conflict with Herod and Herodias, much the same as he was in Matt 22 with Caesar. Matthew's motive here was to illustrate Jesus' superior wit in public, whilst Mark sought not to confuse his readers, so Mark placed Christ in a private context to further his disciples' comprehensive training.⁶⁰

According to Robert Stein, Mark 10 and Matt 19 refer to the same incident. Mark recorded the actual words of Christ because Paul and Luke understood the statement as having no exception, but Holy Spirit led Matthew to add words to show his readers all of

⁵⁹ Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark," 222-224.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 232.

what Jesus meant.⁶¹ His statement on divorce did not cover every situation but was given as a general principle. Correctly understood, it emphasised the permanence of marriage. To contemplate divorce, which is a failure of the divine purpose, is to think on a different wavelength than Christ. In the end, the church must emphasise God's forgiveness without minimising the failure that is a divorce, while making every marriage an example of the divine ideal.⁶² In order to do this, Jesus had to redefine μοιχᾶται away from men adulterating against each other.⁶³

André Feuillet recalls the prophets rather than the sages when Jesus proclaimed that man ought not to separate what Yahweh has joined.⁶⁴ Luke 16.18 invited the reader to recognise Jesus' apparent contradiction to the law as, instead, Jesus re-joining Mosaic Law to its fundamental intention.⁶⁵ Matthew wished to substitute the *Mosaic regime* with an economy of grace because Jesus came to save—rather than to judge—sinners.⁶⁶ In

⁶¹ Stein, "Is It Lawful," 116.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 121. This refreshing evangelical article emphasised all the right things, it did not get hooked up on all the wrong things like squabbling over the letter of the law, and made sure that Christ was glorified in the end. Its beautiful sentiments, however, can be misconstrued and misrepresented by the homosexual agenda. I highly doubt this author or Jesus had gay marriage in mind when they discussed the permanency of a divine union.

⁶³ Feuillet says that Mark's account is less primitive and less satisfying than Matthew's account. So, verse 9 is authentic. Matthew included the clause due to his rabbinic context, whereas the others excluded it because Gentile readers would not have understood it. This teaching is authentic to Christ since no other Jew would invent something that surpassed Mosaic Law, nor would a pagan who ceaselessly objected to Judaism's strict moral code. He further states that one needs to understand that there was no concept of separation of goods and people without the right to remarriage, so all separations were forbidden by Christ who condemned remarriage, but not divorce. He introduced the notion that men can adulterate against their wives, thus giving women equal rights (he spoke openly of them in his parables, and he healed many). The entire point of his discussion was to affirm the permanence of marriage from the first pages of the Bible; men will be permanently dedicated to their wives once Holy Spirit is permanently present in their lives. Feuillet, "L'indissolubilité Du Mariage," 458.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 423.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 428.

order to defend the sanctity of marriage, Christians need to defend Christ's authority as the mouthpiece of God. As Christ's bride, the church needs to restore the authority of the bridegroom who sought to make human marriage the splendour as intended at creation.⁶⁷ He is the bridegroom of Song of Songs 6.4 who seeks to unite with his bride what schism has broken.⁶⁸

The early church was called to care for the widow, not the divorcée. Were they understood to be the same, or were women expected to remarry in order to survive, whilst widows could count on hand-outs, perhaps because they were too old to remarry? Matthew was writing primarily to a Jewish audience, so he included the exception phrases for his Jewish audience since he assumed, like his audience, that remarriage was permitted. He had the good sense not to condemn remarriage because Christ was not reinterpreting Jewish Law.

H.G. Coiner states that Jesus was clear that marriage in the kingdom of heaven was not so careless, and that God's concession did not mean approval, nor were men's hearts free from judgement.⁶⁹ Those who hid behind the law and used divorce for *successive polygamy* were exposed. If an individual divorced another without causing anyone to be unfaithful (husband, wife, or outsider), then that individual would be clear of violating Exod 20.14. Logically, an unfaithful wife cannot be forced to be unfaithful by the act of divorce. One must not derive an entire ethos of marriage based on the exception phrases: Jesus' words described God's design for marriage, God's judgement

⁶⁷ Ibid., 454.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 459.

⁶⁹ Harry G. Coiner, "Those Divorce and Remarriage Passages," *CTM* 39.6 (1968): 367–84.

over fallen hearts, and marital standards in the kingdom of heaven. Holy Spirit necessarily had to indwell another for that individual to commit to a life-long partnership. Coiner believes that pastors would do well to imitate Christ rather than the Pharisees in this case.

Herod divorced and remarried on a whim. Jesus was well aware of that sin, and commented on it so that those who were sinful would either cease their ways or not join. Élian Cuvillier follows Coiner and Feuillet by firmly stating that God never envisioned divorce at creation. By writing a certificate of divorce, one would obey the law yet disobey the will of God. Jesus put God's intentions in the foreground to protect the weak rather than favour the strong. The pericope of the rich young ruler was an extension of the perspective expressed in the divorce pericope where Jesus confirmed that what is impossible for humans (obeying Christ's commands) is possible for God, while the demands of Torah are possible for humans. Therefore, Matthew implied that Jesus' statements were primary and Torah observance was secondary. Jesus' teachings were to regulate his disciples' lives. Responsibility towards God and neighbour, rather than obedience to the law is how humans justify themselves.⁷⁰

R.T. France is convinced that Jesus appealed to an earlier principle in Genesis to properly interpret a later concession in Deuteronomy. Jesus implied that divorce and remarriage was adultery, but in Matthew 19.9, it was the husband's remarriage that caused the woman to commit adultery. France cautions modern-day Christians against building expectations on the concession but to build expectation on the ideal, instead.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Cuvillier, "Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel," 159.

⁷¹ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 281.

According to P. Lamarche, the exception phrase in 19.9 is complex. It is unlikely to deal with an illicit union given that those couples ought to divorce, and since unbelieving spouses may be divorced, they might also stay together. What is unclear is whether one might remarry upon such a divorce. The discussion has little to do with remarriage, focussing instead on reasons for repudiation. Furthermore, because this saying is imprecise, it is not to be taken as an absolute declaration of Kingdom law. Rather, it is an edifying principle that is to direct marriages in total love. Indissolubility is handed over to Yahweh himself rather than being codified into law. It must never become an idol. Matthew's point is that one's love and respect for one's spouse is the way to God himself.⁷² Finally, Bruce Kaye agrees that Christ's singular condition for divorce was not a universal ideal for marriage. Proof of this is that 1 Cor 6 argued against fornication with a prostitute, but Eph 5 referred to Messiah and his church, an interpretation unavailable to Christ before his resurrection.⁷³

Conclusion

Modern interpretations vary for Matt 19.9. It is believed to mean that divorce is disallowed, that remarriage is disallowed, and that it is necessary in Matthew's gospel in order to exonerate Joseph with his intent to divorce Mary in Matt 1. One creative interpretation was suggested based on Christ's supposed eschatological understanding of family. In many interpretations there was the suggestion of Christ's new ethos, one in

⁷² P. Lamarche, "L'indissolubilité selon Matthieu: Matthieu 19,9 in Les divorcés remariés.," *Christus Paris* 30.120 (1983): 475–82.

⁷³ Kaye, "'One Flesh' and Marriage," 56.

which men were to remain sexually faithful to their wives. All interpreters would agree that Christ was re-introducing his disciples and his audience to the marital ideal first expressed at creation in Genesis. Many of them would further concede that the causes for divorce were not discussed in Matt 19.3-9 since the point of the passage was that marriage in the kingdom of heaven is to be permanent. There is no mention yet of perpetual celibacy for divorcés. Once these ‘divorce and remarriage’ passages are understood in their proper context and meaning, they demand much more astute and careful pastoral care than the mechanical employment of legal norms to determine who it is that is guilty or innocent of fornication and/or malicious desertion.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Coiner, “Those Divorce and Remarriage Passages,” 284.

CHAPTER 5

HOW SHOULD ONE TRANSLATE ΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ?

No exegesis would be complete without a study of the word πορνεία since it is at the heart of the debate surrounding Matt 19.9's meaning. Though it is usually thought to denote any sort of sexual indiscretion, there are those who assume it had a special meaning in Matthew whilst others believe it made its way into the text by accident. Nevertheless, it is still widely accepted that Matthew favoured πορνεία on purpose to refer to עֲרֻנָּת דְּכָר in Deut 24.1, which was alluded to earlier in Matt 19.7. Once its meaning is clear, then the pronouncement on the eunuch will inform Jesus' intention towards divorcés. Clarity here will go a long way to answering the thesis question.

πορνεία's Definition

The bulk of the differences in the above interpretations for Matthew's exception phrases (particularly the one in 19.9) lay in πορνεία's translation. The most common translation for πορνεία is *fornication* or some catch-all derivative that would include adultery, infidelity, and incest.¹ Fleming asserts that it is dubious to use it to mean a *false marriage* (i.e., incest) in Christ's response to the Pharisees asking him about a *true wife*.²

¹ Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," 109; Feuillet, "L'indissolubilité Du Mariage," 430; Adams, Steele, and Ryrle, "Point and Counterpoint," 20; Janzen, "The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew," 72.

² Fleming, "Christ and Divorce," 117, emphasis mine. Also, Feuillet says: « La traduction de πορνεία est fort probablement celle de « fornication »... Le terme πορνεία conserve son sens ordinaire dans Mathieu 15,19 et dans plusieurs passages pauliniens (dont 1 Co 6,13.18 ; 7,2 ; 2 Co 12,21 ; Gal 5,19 ; Ep 5,3; Col 3,5 ; 1 Th 4,3). De plus la clause d'exception se rattache aux motifs de divorce de Deutéronome 24,1 et n'a pas rapport à un mariage qui est nulle ou interdit. Il

In Janzen's view, πορνεία is best understood as meaning adultery in the traditional sense and sex during betrothal. This was not necessarily Christ agreeing with Shammai since Shammai's definition of *adultery* is lost in the annals of time. A just divorce, he continues, entitled the husband to retain his wife's dowry (which were her children's inheritance), whereas any other cause for divorce forced him to repay it. Matthew chose πορνεία since it connoted extra-betrothal sex, something the righteous Joseph felt necessitated divorce in Matt 1.³ So, Janzen assumes that the debate between Hillel & Shammai was not only on the meaning of עֲרֹנָת דְּבָרַי but also on what constituted just marriage and exemptions from repaying the dowry.⁴

Still, its application is debated. For example, H.G. Coiner believes that πορνεία denoted destructive sexuality that destroyed another's family life, and that it was used interchangeably with μοιχᾶται by the early church to mean *post-marital infidelity*. It was likely used to denote destructive sexuality, the antithesis of responsible sexuality.⁵ Sigal seems to agree with Coiner when he says that πορνεία did not always mean *adultery*, but in no way was incest, fornication, or harlotry ever considered adultery in the first century. In the case of Matt 5.32 and 19.9 the author used μοιχᾶται (*adultery*) and its synonym πορνεία to make the limitation precise and specific.⁶ Finally, Davies and Allison assert

ne s'agit pas de renvoyer une femme avec laquelle on n'est pas légitimement marié. » Feuillet, "L'indissolubilité Du Mariage," 430.

³ Janzen, "The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew," 75.

⁴ Interestingly, Deut 24.1-4 acknowledges that divorce is legitimate, and regulates it according to עֲרֹנָת דְּבָרַי (an indecent thing) appears earlier in 23.12-14. It does not refer to sexual sin there, but rather to excrement. Thus, nothing that was in the Israelite camp was to be repulsive to Yahweh. Likewise, nothing about one's wife was to be repulsive. Jay Adams concludes that sexual sin was not in mind. Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 64. Also Keener, *And Marries Another*, 38-31.

⁵ Coiner, "Those Divorce and Remarriage Passages," 378.

⁶ Sigal, *The Halakah of Jesus of Nazareth*, 96.

“μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is the equivalent of παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας” which justified Joseph in chapter 1. They continue by saying, “In our Gospel, divorce is not adultery only when the marriage bond has already been broken by unfaithfulness.”⁷ An overview of πορνεία’s common translations is in order.⁸

Fornication

Leon Morris believes that the word πορνεία in the Greek was used for “all sorts of sexual sins” in the New Testament.⁹ Adams says that Christ regulated divorce by giving all one reason by which to divorce: sexual sin (πορνεία) in order to tighten the morals surrounding divorce and remarriage in the church. Πορνεία was a broad, catch-all phrase for sexual immorality that included bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, and incest. Adultery is the effect of the πορνεία, not πορνεία itself. Thus, one must be cautious not to ascribe it too narrow a meaning. The exception phrases are directed at those who are married, rather than those who are engaged.¹⁰ A. van den Branden says that πορνεία referred to adultery committed by a woman since men could only do so against another man by sleeping with his wife.¹¹ Dreyer goes one further when she says πορνεία referred to adulterous women, those who had fornicated prior to marriage, and were not virgins.

⁷ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 17.

⁸ There is one uncommon translation put forth by Considine in order to tie it to 1 Cor 7.15. This author proposes it be translated as *the willful rejection of God*. Given that no examples of this translation can be found in English Bibles, it will not be considered further. T Considine, “Except It Be for Fornication,” *ACR* 33 (1956): 214–23.

⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 121.

¹⁰ Confer, for instance, the two instances of forbidden divorce as a penalty in Deut 22.13-19, 28-29. Furthermore, Ezek 23 describes how Yahweh’s wives adulterated. Finally, Jer 3.8 confirms that divorce happens for sexual sin within a marriage. If God uses such terms, then surely humans can divorce. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*, 55.

¹¹ Branden, “Mt. 19,1-12 Dans Une Perspective Historique,” 73.

These women were unacceptable wives for priests, but any priest who was not a virgin would have made a suitable husband. Matthew valued virgins, which was why Jesus was born of a virgin and it was okay to divorce a woman who was not a virgin. Thus, Matthew was interested in conforming to the cultural norms of his region.¹²

Mahoney points out that πορνεία was rare in classical Greek, but that it had a broad meaning in Koiné Greek including idolatry and unlawful sexual intercourse.¹³

Weibling argues that Matt 19.4-5 described God's original design for marriage and provided a context for defining πορνεία in verse 9 as a catch-all term for breaches in all marital concepts found in verse 5. Matt 15.19 uses both πορνεία and μοιχᾶται to convey different concepts, so it is conceivable that Matt 5.32 and 19.9 used the same terms to convey different concepts that served to prevent and restrict divorce.¹⁴ One can see how interpretations can differ even amongst those scholars who agree with the majority definition of πορνεία as *fornication*.

Incest

Adams et al., are convinced that πορνεία referred exclusively to an incestuous relationship in Matt 19.9 based upon Acts 15.20, 29 and 1 Cor 5.1. They say that Christ was allowing divorce amongst close kin, but he never allowed remarriage.¹⁵ Ben Witherington is also keen to this interpretation because Jesus was speaking in a context

¹² Dreyer, "Gender Critique," 1-5.

¹³ Mahoney, "New Look at the Divorce Clauses.," 31.

¹⁴ Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark," 226. Byron would agree, but only if *wife* were translated *woman* so that a man might divorce the one with whom he is fornicating. Byron, "The Meaning of," 94.

¹⁵ Adams, Steele, and Ryrie, "Point and Counterpoint," 20.

where Herod had an incestuous relationship with his sister-in-law. Witherington first claims that each view has its own difficulties since Matthew could have used μοιχᾶται if he had meant *adultery*.¹⁶ So, πορνεία likely referred to a wider range of sexual improprieties than μοιχᾶται. Incest fits best, he concludes, since rabbis allowed for proselytes to remain married to their kin, polygamy was allowed, John the Baptist was beheaded for speaking out against it, and because Jesus was likely in Perea where it all took place.¹⁷

However, Sabourin had—and Janzen later made—some telling observations against this definition, the first being that πορνεία did not have religious metaphorical connotations in Matt 19, so Paul’s usage in 1 Cor 7 is inapplicable.¹⁸ Janzen cautions all those who insist that πορνεία is equivalent to the Hebrew זנות and a reference to incest laws in Lev 17 and 18 because זנות appeared nowhere in these two Levitical chapters. Only once at Qumran can one argue for such a usage, therefore, “[t]his one bit of evidence has to bear too great a probative load when we lump Matthew’s usages of πορνεία in the exception clauses on it.”¹⁹

Blomberg gives the following reasons as to why it did not refer to incest in 19:9: A) such marriages would require annulment, not divorce, B) Herodias’ remarriage raised the question about kinship to a close relative, not her divorce from her first husband, C) πορνεία was not mentioned in Leviticus 18 (which deals with incest), neither in the Greek

¹⁶ Matt 15.19 distinguished it from the traditional word for adultery to make it mean *unchastity*.

¹⁷ Witherington, “Matthew 5:32 and 19:9,” 572ff.

¹⁸ Sabourin, “Divorce Clauses,” 83.

¹⁹ Janzen, “The Meaning of Porneia in Matthew,” 70.

nor in the Hebrew, D) its use in 1 Cor 5.1 proved that it was rare among Gentiles, thus implying that it was less of a problem to Jews outside of Herod's household, and E) a narrow interpretation of Acts 15 does not relieve the tension of what remains a fundamental moral issue grouped with prohibitions against eating blood, strangled meat, and food sacrificed to idols elsewhere in the New Testament.²⁰ A narrow understanding of πορνεία was the exception and never the rule. It was therefore, according to him, a group-all word that would include incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, indecent exposure, fornication, and adultery. As such it ought to be translated as the latter in 19.9.

A Bad Marriage

Finally, Daniel Patte posits that Jesus was encouraging those whose marriages were so awful by telling them that they could divorce. He says that Christ's exception, παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας/μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ referred to marriages made so bad that it would be impossible to see them as a blessing from God. Those are times where people have already put asunder what God has put together, and those are the only times when divorce is permitted.²¹ This view is in concert with those who insist that Christ had a high view of

²⁰ Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 177. Davies and Allison say that it was never translated as *incest* amongst the pre-Nicene fathers, whilst Hanneken points out that it is uncertain as to whether Acts 15 referred to the Holiness code nor is it included in Lev 17-18, so it most likely referred to זָרָה זָרָה of Deut 24.1. Therefore, they argue, πορνεία had a broader meaning to link it to the unspecific זָרָה זָרָה of Deut 24.1. Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 529; and Todd R Hanneken, "Moses Has His Interpreters: Understanding the Legal Exegesis in Acts 15 from the Precedent in Jubilees," *CBQ* 77.4 (2015): 686–706. See also Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 159.

²¹ Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 266.

marriage, and that one was to treat one's spouse as Yahweh had intended from the beginning. However, there is no ancient witness linking πορνεία to an awful marriage.

Why use πορνεία in Matt 19.9?

Craig Blomberg makes an important observation about Greek root words to suggest that Matthew may have made a universal point on gender equality, which would explain why he included this particular saying twice in his gospel but with two different root words.²² Matthew used πορνεία in Matt 19.9 because he wanted to avoid semantic confusion with μοιχᾶται further in the verse, and he wanted a word that would include a broader range of sexual sins as per Shammai. Also the word family from the root “πορν-” were used to refer to female sexual infidelity rather than words from the “μοιχ-” root in Greek. The latter was used, instead, for male sexual improprieties.²³ The word was placed in the middle of the sentence in order to modify both verbs. Should it have been placed at the beginning of the sentence, it would have been given special emphasis, whilst at the end of the sentence it would have been interpreted as the only exception that permitted divorce. Even Witherington concedes that Jesus was being progressive because he was turning the tables on the rabbis by arguing for the permanency of marriage using the same verses with which the rabbis argued for the impermanent nature of marriage.²⁴

²² Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy,” 178.

²³ Bauer, Johannes B, “Bermerkungen Zu Den Matthäischen Unzuchtsklauseln (Mt 5,32; 19,9),” in *Begegnung Mit Dem Wort*, ed. Zmijewski, Josef and Nellessen, Ernst (Bonn: Hanstein, 1980), 26-27. France would say something similar when commenting on Matt. 5.32. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 123. See also Blomberg, *Matthew*, 111; Davies and Allison, *Matthew 1-7*, 531.

²⁴ Witherington, “Matthew 5:32 and 19:9,” 573.

Conclusion

One can see how πορνεία's definition causes several incompatible interpretations from leading modern scholars. Still, πορνεία's widely accepted definition as fornication is the one argued against most often by scholars trying to get a leading edge or to bring forth newer material to understand Christ's words. Furthermore, when 5.32 is interpreted in light of 1.19, and when 19.9 is interpreted in light of 14.1-4, πορνεία has to cover both pre-marital coitus *and* incest. It, therefore, cannot have a narrow meaning. When all is said and done, it is the majority definition that stands. What needs be kept in mind is that its root is used for women's sexual indiscretions, whilst μοιχᾶται referred to a man's sexual improprieties, which meant that Jesus was holding both men and women accountable for the permanency of marriage.

CHAPTER 6

MATT 19.10-12: TO WHOM DOES THE EUNUCH REFER?

Christ's statement regarding the eunuchs is a unique entry into the gospel of Matthew. Upon finishing with the Pharisees by instructing them that marriage was to be permanent like at creation, Jesus then dealt with his disciples' incredulous attitude. He acknowledged that what they had just told him was difficult to accept, and then he compared reactions to his words to the three ways one might become a eunuch.¹ Understanding verse 11 is paramount to understanding the rest.

Antecedent Verse

Verse 11 Refers Back to Verse 9

The disciples reacted as they did in verse 10 because Christ had asked them to make a quantum leap away from traditional Jewish moral practices to a new morality of power-sharing, even powerlessness.² The reason is that verse 11 referred back to what Jesus said, not to what will be said in verse 12, because what provoked the disciples' reaction in verse 10 was the suggestion in verse 9 that women had equal rights.³ Indeed, Carmen Bernabé says the same because verse 11 did not agree with what the disciples said in verse 10, and because the following verse summarised the preceding teaching in

¹ The Essenes (Josephus, *Ant.* 18.1.5; *War* 2.8.2) and Epictetus (Ep. *Epic*, 3.22.37, 47) did the same in the past.

² Weibling, "Reconciling Matthew and Mark," 230.

³ Branden, "Mt. 19,1-12: Dans Une Perspective Historique," 76.

an aphorism.⁴ Stephenson Brooks asserts that Matt 19.10-11 established a narrative tie between verse 9 and verse 12 by both referring back to verse 9.⁵

Quentin Quesnell is convinced that Jesus could not agree with his disciples since it would be “redactionally inconceivable.” He could not have been agreeing with them in this passage because it would be incongruous to call his readers to virginity or celibacy in this passage but nowhere else in his gospel.⁶ Furthermore, Matthew did not mention *wife* as one to be abandoned for the kingdom of heaven in 19.29, whereas Luke 14.26 and 18.29 both do. So, τὸν λόγον in verse 11 referred to something in verse 9.⁷

Leon Morris is nevertheless undecided. The disciples appreciated the full implications of Jesus’ statements and feared what might happen if they were carried through. They found comfort in knowing there was a provision for divorce, even if one never intended to use it, because having a way out of an unhappy marriage might help to alleviate the burden. Jesus’ response confirmed that not all are capable of living up to the standard if this saying refers to his teaching.⁸

⁴ Bernabé Ubieta, “Of Eunuchs and Predators,” 129.

⁵ Stephenson H. Brooks, *Matthew’s Community: The Evidence of His Special Sayings Material*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series; 16 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 107.

⁶ Quentin Quesnell, “Made Themselves Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 19:12),” *CBQ* 30.3 (1968), 344.

⁷ This seems to hold up grammatically as well. The term συμφέρει was found only in Matthew, δὲ in verse 11 could have referred back to verse 9 and anticipated τὸν λόγον in verse 12, but verses 11 and 12d frame verse 12a-c, leading Arthur Dewey to conclude that 12a-c was independent and pre-Matthean. Arthur J Dewey, “The Unkindest Cut of All? Matt 19:11-12,” *Forum* 8.1-2 (1992): 113-22, 114.

⁸ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 485.

Verse 11 Refers Back to Verse 10

Similar to the notion above, verse 11 referred back to a preceding verse, but, in this case, it was self-contained within the pericope, rather than tied to the previous pericope. Jesus agreed with the disciples in verse 10, but only partially because τὸν λόγον referred to their outburst in verse 10. There were some who were not to marry, like eunuchs, and others who had renounced marriage for a celibate life devoted to God's work.⁹ Verse 11 referred to verse 10 and meant that, just as there were individuals who were born without the ability of having sexual relations, and there were those who had been castrated, God would enable others to live celibate lives despite the fact that they were physically capable of sexual relations.¹⁰ In fact, Kleist points out that τὸν λόγον τοῦτον in verse 11 signified that Jesus disregarded the disciples' words in verse 10, while μετὰ avoided openly expressing what it implied in verse 10.¹¹

Bruce Kaye believes that 19.11 referred naturally to verse 10, otherwise Christ's implication was that the Genesis ideal applied only to some. Jesus' response engaged his disciples' response; otherwise, it would be abrupt to refer back to his own saying. Instead, he conceded the difficulty of his position.¹² In verse 10, the disciples clearly did not understand that Jesus exalted monogamy since they exalted celibacy, instead. It was unlikely that τὸν λόγον referred to verse 9 or its antecedents lest one conclude that Jesus encouraged those who had divorced their wives to remain single despite the fact that verse 9 did not exclude remarriage. The gift of celibacy was not for everyone, but Jesus'

⁹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 294.

¹⁰ Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 185.

¹¹ James A. Kleist, "Eunuchs in the New Testament," *CBQ* 7.4 (1945): 448.

¹² Kaye, "'One Flesh' and Marriage," 51.

teachings on divorce were, so there was a connexion to verse 10 because there was a transitional sentence focused on celibacy.¹³ The disciples were quick to pick up on the radical nature of Christ's edict and concluded that there was no advantage to marrying (οὐ συμφέρει γαμῆσαι). Jesus did not deny that it was difficult, but added in verse 10 that it was not for everyone, only for those who were willing to make the sacrifice for the kingdom by refusing to marry.¹⁴ As before, Morris is uncertain, but notes that if it referred to what the disciples had said, Jesus was saying that there were few who could abstain from marriage.¹⁵

Verse 11 is an Interpolation

Enoch Powell asserts that celibacy was not to be favoured over marriage in this passage. Τὸν λόγον τοῦτον has been interpolated because χωρεῖν has not been understood as an intransitive, requiring it to mean *bear*. He is unclear as to how it ought to be understood, only that it was not originally there.¹⁶ So, the debate is whether verse 11 referred to verse 9 or 10.

Comment

That verse 11 referred back to verse 10 is the natural reading of this passage. Jesus acknowledged what was said in 10 and countered not only with 11, but with 12. Jesus was celibate and fully aware that this path, not the giving up of divorce privileges, was

¹³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 20.

¹⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 551.

¹⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 486.

¹⁶ Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 160.

what was difficult to accept. Furthermore, one can read the disciples' reaction as one of jest rather than shock. They could have been teasing Jesus for his own celibate state. So, at no time was Christ proscribing celibacy upon others. He was, instead, asserting that marriage was to be permanent, that it was good for most not to be alone, but others would be celibate for various reasons, with his own celibacy being for the kingdom of heaven. What tied him to the eunuchs was that neither he nor any eunuch had any children. This will become obvious once the various interpretations for the term have been summarised.

Interpretations

Eunuch is an apologetic for Christ's celibacy

Jesus was unmarried, so he may very well have been abused by being called a eunuch, a derogatory term directed at single men. The disciples' reflection on what Jesus had just said may have been said with a wry smile on their face. When read as such, this passage may be an apologetic for the fact that Jesus did not have children, which was a rarity for a Jewish man.¹⁷ Nevertheless, marriage and celibacy were to be seen as different gifts from God for different disciples. That was from where Jesus continued, but he was specific that celibacy was not for everyone, keeping with Matthew's positive outlook on marriage. The eunuchs thus emphasised special character that qualified what the disciples had said in verse 10.¹⁸ The third eunuch was an explanation as to why Jesus was celibate. It was Jesus' standard reaction to the abuse he took from Jewish leaders in

¹⁷ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 283.

¹⁸ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 21.

his day for being celibate.¹⁹ It would not have been uttered only once, but would have been a regular, shattering response to Jesus' critics who abused him for his celibate state.²⁰ So he was turning it for good in Matt 19.10-12. Maloney posits that the Greek διά was used in verse 12 in the causal sense, meaning that one did not need to be a eunuch in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven.²¹ So he concludes that "Christians may be celibate, not because they are deprived, deformed, or in some way 'strange', but because they are so taken up by the overwhelming presence of God's Lordship that they are existentially incapable of married life."²²

Eunuch was a call to radicalisation

Cuvillier says that the eunuch statement confirmed Christ's logic of radicalisation and invited others to order their lives according to the Kingdom of heaven. Superior righteousness gave one access to the kingdom rather than mere observance of the law.²³ So, rather than look at all of this as having to do with marriage and divorce, the eunuch statement had to do with re-ordering one's life according to Jesus' teachings.

Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom

This interpretation believes that eunuchs represented celibates who never married, and Jesus used the term to refer to those who more fully follow the call of the Kingdom

¹⁹ Moloney, "Matthew 19:3-12 and Celibacy," 52.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 53.

²³ Cuvillier, "Torah Observance and Radicalization in the First Gospel," 156.

of Heaven.²⁴ Celibacy was legitimate for some, so there was a call to those who had the ability to remain celibate for the kingdom of heaven to do so all the while discouraging others from trying.²⁵ Jesus advocated stricter faithfulness to one's spouse, be it earthly or heavenly, so eunuchs and spouses were to keep their sex drives in check.²⁶ Some in the kingdom could be eunuchs and not reproduce whilst others would have children and be granted the grace to live out their marriage until death.

Since the eunuch was tied to the statement on the (presumed) indissolubility of marriage, an incapacity for marriage and married life must have been what Jesus' interlocutors heard.²⁷ The rigor of this teaching was illustrated by the disciples' reaction. They, too, were hard of heart since they viewed their independence from women as better than marriage. However "God's gift... is the state of being in relation with others – including marriage."²⁸ A sound heart is necessary to understand this teaching. There were times when abstinence from marriage and sex were good in order to promote the kingdom. Thus, as Mounce says, the point on celibacy was emphasised by the saying on the eunuch.²⁹

²⁴ Sabourin, "Divorce Clauses," 81.

²⁵ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 485.

²⁶ Kaye, "'One Flesh' and Marriage," 52; Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy," 195.

²⁷ Kleist, "Eunuchs in the New Testament," 449.

²⁸ Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 267.

²⁹ Mounce, *Matthew*, 182.

Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom for a time

Sex is not an adult's duty, while, in certain cases (like Joseph's in 1.18-25), abstinence is the will of God. This makes Davies and Allison ponder whether the eunuch statement is tied to Joseph. That Joseph did not 'know' Mary during her time with child was designed not only to make for the literal fulfilment of Isaiah 7.14 but also to exhibit Joseph's exemplary behaviour: if Jesus' father was not exactly a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven, he certainly did know when to refrain from coupling with his wife. One may be reasonably confident that there were those in Matthew's original audience who would have found such meaning in the text, and hence in Joseph an example to follow.³⁰ This hearkens to Joseph in the Old Testament who ran away from sexual temptation rather than embrace the opportunity. This would be a hallmark of the later church (Galen, *De libris propriis* 14).

A. van de Branden agrees that eunuch referred to temporary celibacy, but he disagrees that 19.12 had an antecedent. He says that the disciples reacted against the popular notion that men ruled the roost and women were of their property like cattle or houses. Verse 12 had no antecedent nor did it transition anywhere, so it never belonged to the pericope, therefore it must have been an interpolation. Instead, he believes that, since the passage had to do with literal eunuchs because that was what the verse was talking about, it was not worth getting married nor remarried since the end of the world was near. Still, the verse did not call individuals to perpetual celibacy.³¹ In all, this view ties the

³⁰ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 10.

³¹ Branden, "Mt. 19,1-12: Dans Une Perspective Historique," 79.

eunuch saying to some form of celibacy, but emphasises the temporary nature of the celibacy.

Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom by a divorcé(e)

Brooks admits that this view is at best an assumption because context is difficult to ascertain since there is no parallel in the New Testament for anyone showing concern with eunuchs or to suggest that celibacy was a way to show one's dedication to the kingdom of heaven.³² There did not seem to be any hesitation to accept a eunuch into the faith community in Acts 8.26-40, which was consistent with Isa 56.3-5, which, in turn, was the reversal of Deut 23.2-9. The term εὐνοῦχοι may have been a Christian term to describe celibacy apart from Jewish views. Still, Davies and Allison state the obvious when they point out that vv. 11-12 did not command anyone to be celibate upon divorce.³³

Eunuch referred to celibacy for the kingdom, but not by a divorcé(e)

Jerome Kodell is convinced that celibacy in the Christian context must always be for the sake of the kingdom, which is not available to every Christian who should try hard enough or merely choose it as one of many options. It is a response to the kingdom, "a preconscious insight that the kingdom would consume [one's] energy for forming covenants like marriage."³⁴ *Eunuch* was a derogatory term that Jesus redeemed. The

³² Brooks, *Matthew's Community*, 107.

³³ Davies and Allison, *Matthew 19-28*, 27.

³⁴ Jerome Kodell, "Celibacy Logion in Matthew 19:12," *BTB* 8.1 (1978): 22.

Essenes would avoid women and semen to remain ceremonially pure for a holy war. They, along with Christ and John the Baptist, had given up intercourse for spiritual purposes despite their natural capacity for it. Their celibacy was voluntary and permanent for heavenly motives. Celibacy in Matt 19.10-12 was not demanded of the divorcé: rather, it was a spiritual stance from an individual capable of intercourse choosing not to be consumed by intercourse. The eunuch, therefore, did not demand continence after divorce.³⁵

Hagner agrees, but with an eschatological twist. He says that the first two groups of eunuchs were literal whilst the third was metaphorical. This latter category were those who, like John the Baptist, had renounced marriage altogether to focus on kingdom work. “If Jesus, like John the Baptist and Paul (cf. 1 Cor 7:29, 31), expected the imminent end of the age, the idea of celibacy would take on a less objectionable aspect.”³⁶ It did not mean sexual continence by divorcés, nor did it tell disciples to renounce their wives for the sake of the kingdom. It merely highlighted how Jesus and his cousin had given up what men normally sought in order to seek solely the kingdom of God. The third eunuch demanded continence only of these rare men.

Eunuch referred to gay rights

David Hester posits that Christ was a forerunner to gay rights. He begins by describing eunuchs as anything but celibate and morally chaste, so the saying in Matthew 19 radically undermined cherished assumptions about hetero-sexist ideals. This author

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 550.

would say that it is odd to interpret the eunuch as a symbol of chastity and celibacy given that his inability to procreate did not mean he was unable to have sex. He states, “In fact, eunuchs were universally characterized by the frequency, ease and adeptness with which they perform sex acts with both men and women.”³⁷ Nevertheless, Matthew’s context used the eunuch to contrast procreativity and marriage. In a 21st century context, eunuchs are to symbolise homosexuals and trans-genders.

Hester is sure that there was nothing wrong with lying with another man in Lev 18.22 and 20.13; rather, it had to do with the loss of male prestige in creating gender confusion, like castration would. A eunuch was understood as feminine in appearance and behaviour, thus transgressing gender. Later, the church struggled with ritual castration as a sign of devotion to Christ so much so that it was discussed at Nicaea. There, a rhetorical invention allegorising the eunuch as chaste was necessary for political and ecclesiastical leverage in the fight against ritual castration. This manly eunuch could control—rather than castrate—his sexual urges, contrary to what was popular, self-evident, and widely practised.

Jesus used the eunuch to reject the naturalisation of the male/female binary. Jesus inserted the saying to proclaim that those who practise things rejected biblically can participate fully in the life of the church. Because the eunuch was never healed anywhere in scripture, homosexuals were to fully engage in the church community without becoming celibate heterosexuals. Anyone arguing against same-sex activities does so

³⁷ Nevertheless, “The fact that eunuchs were seen as objects of sexual desire did not shield them from vituperation directed precisely at the sexual practices that made them adept lovers”, J David Hester, “Eunuchs and the Postgender Jesus: Matthew 19.12 and Transgressive Sexualities,” *JSNT* 28.1 (2005), 23.

from the unchrist-like—but biblically sound—perspective that those activities transgress gender identities. In the end, the eunuch was there to challenge the “sanctity of hetero-sexist ideology.”³⁸

Hester highlights a eunuch’s lifestyle to rightly inform his readers that eunuchs were not at all celibate. Where he falters is to conclude that the single verse on eunuchs undermines what he calls the “sanctity of hetero-sexist ideology” of the previous verses. The simplest reason why the eunuch statement would be included was because Jesus was receiving criticism from his religious opponents for his own celibacy. There is no need to anachronistically insert a 21st century debate into a first century debate about divorce. Furthermore, Hester’s theory that the celibate eunuch was a Nicean invention runs into trouble with Justin Martyr’s same interpretation a century earlier.³⁹ Hester would be better to associate the over-sexed eunuch with the over-sexed Pharisees who divorced and remarried on a whim, rather than with modern-day homosexuals.⁴⁰

Hester’s least informed comment is that eunuchs (who represent homosexuals) were never healed, so gays ought to never be healed, but fully integrated into church life. He fails to note that neither paedophiles nor spousal abusers (among others) were ever healed, either. It is absurd to insist that anyone ought to be fully engaged in the church without having to change one’s behaviour or identity when Christ demanded such

³⁸ Ibid., 40.

³⁹ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 15, 29.

⁴⁰ Herodotus illustrated how psychologically disturbing it was to be a eunuch (Herodotus, *Histories*, 8.105-106). If the eunuch challenged manliness, it did so at the peril of the eunuch. So, it is humane to forbid castration and uphold the gender binary since it is rooted in compassion from God.

change. Lastly, his assumption that laws are written to avoid confusing one's identity is wrong. No law was written to prevent ideological confusion. Rather, this author is ideologically confused. Approved sex is one penis in one vagina. It is the way God created it and wants it. To agree is not hetero-sexism: it is Godly.

There is no interpretive tradition in which the apostles of Christ went ahead to be "eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven" as this article describes. No one went ahead and became openly gay or openly promiscuous for the sake of the kingdom upon reading these verses of Jesus. It is convenient to interpret them as such 2000 years later in light of the rise of homosexuality and sexual liberation, but it is not found in this passage. Nevertheless, Hester rightly corrects the view that eunuchs were celibate.

Eunuch referred to the Essenes

Constantin Daniel puts forth the view that Eunuch referred to the Essenes.⁴¹ When the disciples said that it would be easier to be saved if one were unmarried, it was a reference to unmarried Jews, namely, the Essenes. Jesus would naturally object since Essenes were interested in the kingdom of Israel, not the kingdom of God.⁴² Still, celibacy may have come later in their community. Daniel states it thus: "Il est donc assez probable que le célibat s'imposa, comme règle de vie, plus tard, lorsqu'il devint une nécessité que les Esséniens furent contraints d'introduire, pour conserver la cohésion de

⁴¹ Constantin Daniel, "Esséniens et Eunuques, Matthieu 19:10-12," *RevQ* 6.3 (1968): 353–79.

⁴² "Et en effet, l'on retrouve dans le Nouveau Testament, comme l'ont remarqué quelques auteurs, des enseignements qui sont exactement le contraire des doctrines esséniennes et qui semblent dirigés contre les thèses des Esséniens." Ibid 353.

leur communauté.”⁴³ Celibacy was always understood here, and never castration. In fact, it was taboo to speak of castration amongst rabbis.⁴⁴ As expected, no one spoke of castrated men in the chapter, so Constantin Daniel used Isa 56.45 as a guide since 1) he was an important prophet, 2) Jesus first read from him at synagogue, and 3) he spoke of the eternal kingdom of heaven. A eunuch was an unmarried, childless man. To call anyone a eunuch was an insult in the same vein as calling a woman sterile.

Daniel figures that Matt 19.12’s first category of eunuchs was likely referring to those who had no attraction to marriage despite having libido since cases where children were born without sexual organs were too rare to warrant mention. These were not cases of men fighting libido for the sake of purity, but referred to those who were psychotic or suffered from maladies that would exclude them from the matrimonial circuit (e.g. Down’s Syndrome). The second category was a reference to the Essenes who voluntarily fought concupiscence by being the only Jewish sect to teach others not to marry and have children. The third category referred to Jesus himself. All three categories, he says, referred to uncastrated eunuchs since 1) Deut 23.1 forbade it, 2) Herod’s eunuchs were unpopular, and 3) Rome had disallowed castrating slaves and would later disallow castration altogether. The disciples spoke of preferring to be unmarried, so it was unlikely that Christ responded with a reference to castrated men. Matt 5.29 exaggerated human dismemberment, so, too, would 19.12. Constantin Daniel abandons literalism to be able to see the allusion to Isaiah. Otherwise, there is no enigma to verse 12.

⁴³ Ibid, 377.

⁴⁴ “Nous n’avons pu trouver dans la littérature rabbinique une seule mention d’une castration réalisée chez un enfant ou un jeune homme juif...Même les rabbins ne veulent pas dire « châtrés » quand ils parlent des eunuques.” Ibid., 386.

Christ kept divorce in a masculine context in Matt 19. He was reinterpreting the Mosaic Law, but he was not rewriting it despite his appeal to Genesis. This is obvious since the eunuch saying was in no way beneficial to women. Christ was trying to tell people that celibacy did not mean being a spinster, but was a valid lifestyle for the kingdom of heaven.

Eunuch referred to gender equality

Rick Talbott has argued that Matthean communities struggled with gender roles.⁴⁵ They lived in a context of domination and oppression by men in power. He uses the example of the Greek god Uranus who was unfit to rule upon his castration. This meant that contemporary Christians lived in a Kyriocentric world, so Matthew, through Christ, opened the way to an alternative masculinity. Christ's followers were to be antikyriarchal based on the following examples: 1) Jesus subverted paternal power to his father in heaven (Matt 23.9), 2) he did not mention his father in 12.50, but mentioned *sisters* and *mothers* instead, making them all equal to men, and 3) sons were not to bury their fathers; rather, sons were to follow Christ (Matt 8.22). Furthermore, the kingdom of heaven emancipated women in order to validate itself. All of these things undermined kyriarchy. Meals in the gospel shaped women into equals rather than sexual exploits, and upper classes ate with lower classes, thus making class distinction taboo in the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁶ Talbott further notes that nowhere in the ancient world were eunuchs renowned

⁴⁵ Rick Talbott, "Imagining the Matthean Eunuch Community: Kyriarchy on the Chopping Block," *JFSR* 22.1 (2006): 21–43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

for their celibate ways.⁴⁷ Instead, eunuchs were dominated males who had their ability to procreate—and to sire a lineage—removed, making them the subject of ridicule. So here is the second of three scholars who interpret Matt 19.10-12 without mention of celibacy for divorcés.

The third is Carmen Ubieta who agrees that one must understand first century patriarchy prior to interpreting Matthew's eunuch statement.⁴⁸ Honour among first century Mediterranean men revolved around challenging and responding to challenges in the public sphere in order to spend as little time as possible in the home amongst women. Refusing a challenge was enough to be accused of lacking testicles, which was the seat of manliness. One especially shameful thing was adultery, something only women could do, since a man was to defend himself from such a thing. To fail to do so made him a laughing stock.

Women, on the other hand, were guests in a man's household, making them vulnerable to a breach of contract. Men were forever to ensure the patriarchal lineage and were to dominate their women lest they be socially castrated. The disciples' reaction in Matt 19.10 illustrated this, whilst Christ's response let it be known that a disciple's dishonour may be in obeying him, but that his father would honour those who, through their behaviour, sought to elevate women as equals. Jesus declared the kingdom of heaven's values from the dawn of time that subverted patriarchy (cf. 8.21, 22; 10.35, 36) as an alternative to contemporary patriarchy by highlighting the record of human origins. It caused disciples to lose honour in their communities and be subject to name calling

⁴⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁸ Ubieta, "Of Eunuchs and Predators," 129.

(i.e., *eunuch*). Still, quoting Gen 1.27 alluded to gender equality since both were created in the image of God, and 2.24 placed the marital relationship above any patriarchal interests. So, prior to the eunuch statement, Christ had asserted that adultery might be committed against women. All of this worried the disciples. Their relatives' reactions would be strong, and the community would be damning, so much so that they thought it would be better to remain celibate.

Ubieta argues that Jesus rebuked them by first acknowledging that one would have to change their line of thinking in order to put this into practise, but this was a gift from God. Indeed, they would appear to be geldings in light of other men, relinquishing aggression and dominance to lose honour in the eyes of men but to gain honour in the eyes of Yahweh and status in his kingdom. It should not escape notice that Christ responded to a challenge with a challenge whilst never assuming his challengers' perspective on marital relations. It would seem that the issue with first century machismo was a man not leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife. The patriarchal lineage that needed be ensured was that of the heavenly father.

Ubieta appeals to Aristotle, Xenophon, Plutarch, Assyrian law, as well as Titus for contextual aid in understanding Christ by Matthew's contemporaries in Israel, looking to the Greco-Roman world and the Arab world for a definition of manliness and imposing that idea of manliness onto a Jewish society who did not read these authors and did not adhere to their edicts so much as they did to Moses. She refers to patrilineage in the Roman Empire as though it were common currency in Judea. She assumes the Pharisees agreed with the Greco-Roman patriarchy and syncretised it with their mosaic laws. Yet a challenge remains; Jesus was calling men to quit their honour games by presenting the

ultimate honour game: abandon the promise of honour in one's community for the promise of honour in the eyes of one's heavenly father. Still, she argues against the view that women were weak, but that Christ was protecting them from the stigma of dishonour at being rejected when he insisted that their husbands remain with them until death. This completely contradicts the equality for which she argues in Christ's statements, and it still has patriarchy at its roots, with Christ assuming that women were too weak to recover from the stigma of being rejected. Furthermore, there was no challenge directed toward those who would follow Christ to look upon these rejected women as whole human beings, equal to those who were married. Upon reading her article, one might wonder if the disciples' reaction in 19.10 was not only to the loss of privilege, but to the ridicule they would face in obeying these edicts that Christ imposed upon them in regards to their wives. It was just not worth the trouble to be made fun of for being a good husband in the eyes of God.

Eunuch Proved That Marriage Is Indissoluble Since He Could Not Marry

This view assumes that the disciples in the gospels served as auxiliaries to Christ's speeches. They questioned, misunderstood, objected, or advanced the action, all the while continually being rebuked and corrected so that his teachings might be restated. Quesnell believes that the teaching that needed restating is that a spouse ought to love the other in the union at the risk of "wasting one's life on the other" like Christ did for his people.⁴⁹ Everyone and anyone is worthy of love until death. So, "To continue this loyal

⁴⁹ Quesnell, "Made Themselves Eunuchs," 358.

and perfect love, even when the love is not returned, is effectively to make oneself a eunuch, a person incapable of marriage for the rest of one's life."⁵⁰ In essence, Jesus taught that there was no unworthy object for love.

This interpretation sees verse 12 as neither a call to practise celibacy nor an argument against marriage since it was only uttered in response to an objection. What is clear was that Christ expressed that the unity of marriage was a mystery to which one needed to adhere in faith. Marriage as gospel is a challenge of faith where couples proclaim the gospel akin to Eph 5.22-31, making themselves holy and facilitating holiness in others. The Pauline passage explained why Christ's words were mysterious. Like Christ who patiently waits for his bride, one must wait for one's estranged spouse. A eunuch in the kingdom of heaven is therefore an individual devoted to the ideal of marital fidelity and forever incapable of marrying again.

Francis Moloney agrees that the eunuch statement was not a call to celibacy, but he approaches it from another angle. He states that the second eunuch referred to those who had entered the Christian community only to be divorced because they were close kin then one of them decided to return to pagan ways like in 1 Cor 7.12-16 (which is a stretch),. He creates a fictitious context in which pagan converts caused marital strife in the community. The third eunuch was used in an analogous sense to denote those Christians who were overwhelmed by Yahweh's Lordship, making it impossible for them to commit themselves to another marriage unless one's former partner were dead.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Moloney, "Matthew 19:3-12 and Celibacy," 49.

Waiting for a spouse and being alone was not that way from the beginning (Gen 2). Quesnell argues for a magnificent witness for Christ and the church, but he does not propose any way of helping those who choose to follow this incredible vision of patiently waiting for an estranged spouse to return and be reconciled. So there is no grace in any of this, just a push to proclaim the gospel alone.

Eunuch Meant Jesus Was Introducing Divorce As A Sin

Jay Adam, Paul Steele, and Charles Ryrie are sure that the disciples' reaction in 19.10 proved that Jesus was introducing the concept of divorce as sinful. That explained why they were so discouraged.⁵² Matt 19.12 proved that Jesus never permitted remarriage, but had pronounced it a sin.

Conclusion

One must interpret this passage with caution since it had nothing to do with outsiders; it had to do with Jews who did not castrate themselves. If the eunuch was to be a transgressive sexuality that was neither man nor woman and not heterosexual, one must provide evidence that they lived together, adopted babies, and imitated the heterosexual lifestyle. Hester is trying to open a door towards accepting other sexualities in the church by using the eunuch statement as a proof text, but fails miserably. Nevertheless, we retain from him the fact that eunuchs were neither celibate nor sexually inactive.

⁵² Adams, Steele, and Ryrie, "Point and Counterpoint," 20.

None of the cited scholars posit that eunuchs could have children, and some have rightly pointed out the fact that eunuchs were promiscuous. I would therefore conclude that the third instance of the eunuch referred to Jesus himself, who was redeeming the derogatory statement, highlighting that some men did not abuse their power by arbitrarily divorcing women, and eunuchs in the kingdom of heaven did not abuse their power as a third gender by being promiscuous without fear of procreation. Rather, they mimicked Joseph in running away from Potiphar's wife, or Joseph in abstaining from sex with Mary until Christ was born, or John the Baptist who concerned himself entirely with announcing the advent of the kingdom of heaven. What eunuchs and Christ had in common was that they had no children, not their celibate ways. Jesus was not abiding by the typical heterosexual lifestyle of matrimony and child rearing in adulthood, so he was keen to point himself out as doing so for God's sake, probably because he thought the end of time was near.

CONCLUSION

Matthew began his gospel with Christ's genealogy that was punctuated with the names of five women who were either involved in sexual misdeeds or suspected of it. His first narrative, which immediately follows the genealogy, recounts the story of a righteous man contemplating divorce as a result of suspected unchastity by his betrothed. While the episode ends happily for the couple, their son's first sermon defends his adopted father's righteousness shortly after he opened. In Matt 5.27-32, Jesus introduced a stricter notion of adultery that began with one's intent, while admonishing couples to remain married. The exception phrase in v. 32 served, in part, to exonerate Matthew's qualification of Joseph as *righteous* in 1.19. Matthew's community took it for granted that one could remarry upon divorce, and so did the greater Christian community in the first century where widows were to be cared for (cf. 1 Tim 5), but divorcees were never mentioned.

Matthew foreshadows Christ's fate in Matt 14.1-12 by recounting how a politician and later ally to Christ's executioner would so blatantly disregard Jewish law and behead a prophet without a trial. Herod Antipas' story was also important to set up the exception phrase in Matt 19.9. His divorce and remarriage to his brother's wife who had a child in her previous marriage flouted Mosaic Law. John the Baptist would speak out against it and die, while Christ would later find himself in the same region when asked about divorce.

Matt 19.1-8 shows Christ moving to Jerusalem through Perea for the first time in the gospel. When in Herod Antipas' territory, he is asked the hot question of divorce for any reason, a topic that had cost his cousin his life. The words *for any cause* in v.3 place

the debate in the broader context of the one between rabbis Hillel and Shammai on the meaning of עֲרֻת דָּבָר in Deut 24.1-4, and to let readers know that Jesus would not here deal with the full extent of the topic. Instead, he would comment on the immediate situation at hand. Christ further emphasised the permanency of marriage by appealing to the creation story. He noted that Yahweh joined couples together into one flesh from the beginning. Moses would merely concede to divorce due to hardness of heart.

The exception words in 19.9 mean the same thing as 5.32, so one can see that marriage can be ended not only with the exception phrases, but also with Christ insinuating it could in 19.6. Christ's new ethos underscored the permanency of marriage from the world's first couple. Nevertheless, one could divorce should one's spouse be unchaste (πορνεία), which would include pre-marital unchastity (1.18-19) and incest (14.3). Thus, πορνεία needs to be translated with at least these two definitions in mind, so its traditional translation of *fornication* is best. Remarriage was assumed to happen, and it was cautioned against by Christ's pronouncement that it was adultery to do so except under the strictest of circumstances. Celibacy is never mentioned for divorcés.

Nevertheless, some scholars have concluded that the eunuch statement in Matt 19.12 was Christ arguing for the celibacy of divorcé(e)s despite the fact that the eunuch was never a symbol of celibacy in the ancient world. The ancient scholars who had argued for the continued celibacy of all who had divorced had unhealthy views of sex and marriage, and they were not Jewish. Hence, their interpretations seem far from what Christ intended. Instead, one must conclude that Jesus was defending himself as a celibate for the kingdom of heaven. Celibacy was only for some, not all. Christ had affirmed the Gen 2 edict of the permanency of marriage in verse 19.9, so he was not

undoing the same proclamation by Yahweh that it was not good for men to live alone. If one were to live alone, it was for the kingdom of heaven, something that was not easy for all to accept.

APPENDIX

MATT 19.13-15

Largely ignored in the discussion on divorce and remarriage are children, both in social context and in Matthew's narrative. Matthew goes through great pains to include children at the beginning of chapter 18 when the discussion about human relationships in the kingdom of heaven began, and in 19.13-15, when Matthew closed this episode on human relations. What follows is a short yet monumentally significant appendix whose contents allow readers to see the divorce phrases in Christ's light.

The passage in 19.13-15 is tied to the previous pericope by the word βασιλεία.¹ What the parents sought was a blessing, or even a healing from a holy man's touch.² The disciples saw no value in such an act, so they sent the children away. Christ, on the other hand, could see the value in his touching them, so he allowed for it, even commanded his disciples to allow for it henceforth. France agrees when he says that the disciples may have objected to Jesus being identified as a regular elder since they thought him more important than to be bothered with children. The laying on of hands can be associated with healing, but here, it was probably an act of acceptance and affection. By doing so, Jesus illustrated his new value scale for the kingdom of heaven; God's character is to accept the weak and the unimportant.³ Mounce concurs. Jesus blessed the children by placing his hands on them, meaning that the first who shall be last are not the children; it

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 295.

² Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 351.

³ France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 284.

will be Christ.⁴ A celibate man who did not have children for the sake of the kingdom of heaven was, nevertheless, able to see the value in the little ones. His immortality rested not in his procreative abilities, but in his act of service to humanity, even to the little ones.

The children were in contrast to the disciples. A controversy regarding children flowed naturally after one regarding divorce. Jesus rebuked the disciples using the children to teach an object lesson that his followers were to approach their heavenly father like a child in utter dependence. This instruction was similar to the one in Matt 18, only it was taught to a wider audience.⁵ The children came to Jesus for the blessing they needed so Matthew could illustrate the dependence one needs to have upon God. The disciples' reaction to the children showed that their hearts were still hard.⁶

The Pericope Proves Christ's High-View Of Marriage

The Greek τότε προσήνεχθησαν αὐτῷ παιδία meant that the children were either *brought* or *carried* to Jesus in order to be blessed by his extended hand. That blessing was for those who were humiliated and without status, in this case, children. The pericope was an extension of familial matters that had to do with literal children, since τότε was merely used as a transition.⁷ The disciples may have thought that Jesus had more important things to do than to bless children, but there was precedent for elders

⁴ Mounce, *Matthew*, 182.

⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 295.

⁶ Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 263.

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 551. But see Powell who believes that the children who came to see Christ here represented gentiles. Christ was saying that prayer and baptism was appropriate to gentiles who were presented to him. Powell, *The Evolution of the Gospel*, 154.

blessing children.⁸ Since the disciples are to be like children in chapter 18, then children have a place in Jesus' presence, even on his way to the cross.

Matthew was the only evangelist to state that the children were brought to Jesus for prayer.⁹ As such, one needs to pay particular attention to this pericope in light of the previous ones. Jesus had a particular attitude towards children that the disciples did not share, so they rebuked their parents for taking the time for the spiritual welfare of their children. Jesus was set over against his disciples and rebuked them for their lousy attitude towards the little ones. He then laid his hands upon them (and presumably blessed them), illustrating to all a child's importance in the kingdom of heaven.¹⁰

In the previous pericope about the eunuchs, Christ compared himself to an individual who would not sire children in order to focus on his work for the kingdom of heaven. Nevertheless, he did not outrank those who married and had offspring, nor did he hold marriage in low regard, which was proven in his response to the Pharisees when he affirmed the permanency of marriage. What Jesus held so dear was the union between a husband and wife that was described as *one flesh*. When a couple have a child, they are, literally, *one flesh*. It is in this light that we ought to consider Christ's words, that when a couple marry and have children, they ought not divorce since they are literally sewn together in their children. Chapter 18 is clear that children should be well taken care of, and chapter 14 shows us the grotesque consequences of child neglect and manipulation. Chapter 5 does not mention children, nor hint at it, because its focus was on the

⁸ Evans, *Matthew-Luke*, 351.

⁹ Mark 10.13 mentions only *touch*.

¹⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 487.

permanency of marriage, the importance of keeping one's oaths, and the destructive habits of adultery. Joseph was aware of this, so he decided to let Mary go quietly. Yahweh had to intervene through a mediator so that his oath to Mary was kept. Mary's genealogy was littered with women who had been suspected of sexual indiscretion, but whose children Yahweh took care of for his glory and purposes.

Conclusion

Matthew was trying to show concern for women and children from the outset of his gospel by highlighting women in his genealogy. He mentioned women who were—or suspected of being—sexually indiscreet. Matthew had Christ affirm the permanency of marriage in his Sermon on the Mount, then showed us all in chapter 14 what happened when marriage is perverted. Indeed, if one did not look upon marriage in the same light as Yahweh in Gen 1 and 2, it could lead to dire consequences for others around, even to murder. In other words, there is a blatant disregard for human life and the consequences of divorce when one looks upon marriage as something less than a life-long partnership. It is easy to see, then, how children can be ignored in all of this.

So, Matthew begins a portion of his gospel on human relations in chapter 18 by referring to children first, and then the marginalised. In the kingdom of heaven, these were the ones to be first, much like Christ, ridiculed for his whippings and crucifixion, would be seated at the place of honour in heaven (20.16). This theme was continued in chapter 19 as Christ began his journey south to Jerusalem. Christ was first approached by the Pharisees in an area affected by Herod and Herodias' affair with a question about divorce (but not remarriage). Christ, keenly aware that his cousin had lost his life for

criticising political matrimonial practices, appealed to the highest authority in the universe in his answer. It was he who had united a man and a woman in marriage, so humans, who could break it up, were instructed not to. God's command was for those who were married to remain so, whilst those who divorced were mercifully permitted to cease suffering from a spouse's hard-heart. This was not a proclamation for all marriages, since the context was an inquiry to test Jesus, not a request for him to exposit his ideas on the topic. What he wanted to highlight was Yahweh's command over Moses' concession, which had been confused for a command by his interlocutors.

The conversation then moves to voluntary celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, not celibacy for those who were divorced. Christ was affirming that there were those who, like himself and his cousin John, could forego all sexual activity for a holy disposition before Yahweh and his mission in the world. Nowhere was Matthew discussing re-marital rights for those who followed Christ. Instead, he wanted all to understand in 5.31-32, and 19.3-9, that men could adulterate against women, and, in 19.10-12, there were celibates who could forego all promiscuity for the advancement of God's earthly mission.

The episode closes with parents presenting their children to Christ in order for him to bless and pray for them. The audience understood Christ message of hope to the disenchanted, though his disciples missed it. In order for them to appreciate what he would do for them later in the gospel at Gethsemane, his pupils would have to accept the marginalised *for he would be the chief of the marginalised*. Thus, Matthew's message in Christ regarding marriage was that it was to be permanent, that intercourse was to be reserved for that context, that there were those who forewent coitus for a different

(though equally great) cause, and that his message was to care for the marginalised, like the oft neglected children of divorcés. They were the ultimate illustration of the permanency of marriage since, at no point, can the union of mother and father in a child be separated.

Nowhere was celibacy imposed upon remarriage. Instead, one can see that Jesus took marriage very seriously despite the fact that he was unmarried. He dedicated his life for the propagation of the kingdom of heaven by, among other things, foregoing marriage and progeny so that Yahweh's message may reach all today. It would be wise to apply his words seriously whilst not imposing unnecessary restrictions upon divorcés in the church's zeal to adhere to Christ's commands.

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