

Does God Acknowledge Divorce Due To Physical or Emotional Abuse?

-- Preface --

In my pastoral ministry, I was blessed to have only a few couples come to me who were considering divorce. I served them by reminding them of the commands and promises of God regarding marriage and was pleased to see the Holy Spirit working through this Word of God.

I have, however, had occasion to speak to dozens of people over the years in connection with my secular jobs. Because of my background as a pastor, people often came to me as a sounding board or to unload their frustrations. Many of these had to do with abuse in their current or previous marriage. It became painfully obvious how destructive these abusive situations were to the victim (spiritually, physically and emotionally/psychologically). Guilt was also involved, since they (the victim) were often blamed for the failure of the marriage because they had initiated the divorce and "had not tried hard enough". Guilt of all kinds had been laid on them by the spouse and (many times) the family of the spouse, as well as by their church.

I attempted to turn these "counselling" sessions into an opportunity to share the comforting Word of God to the victims and point them to their Lord and Savior as the true source of comfort and encouragement. To do this, I also needed to have a clear understanding of Scriptural teachings about marriage and divorce and how it affected their situation. Thus began my study of the subject.

A few years ago, I became involved in a situation in which I was asked to elucidate my scriptural reasons for recognizing abuse as a valid reason for divorce. My initial response was dated April 1, 2024. Since that time, it has undergone several revisions as I've considered other people's concerns and suggestions. The accompanying article is my answer.

-- Glenn Oster 12/28/25

Spoiler Alert: Although Jesus and the apostle Paul repeatedly emphasize God's will that husbands and wives remain true to their marriage covenant, neither Matthew 19, Mark 10, Luke 16 or I Corinthians 7 state that getting a divorce is a sin. Each of them state that it is the divorce AND REMARRIAGE which is the sin (because the remarriage breaks the "one flesh"). Therefore, the question facing someone in an abusive marriage is not whether getting a divorce is a sin (it isn't), but whether the physical or emotional abuse is such that they are willing to remain single for the rest of their lives. This caveat ensures that we do not seek divorce for trivial reasons.

Does God Acknowledge Divorce Due To Physical or Emotional Abuse?

What the New Testament says about marriage and divorce

Pastor Glenn Oster

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First, some background:

Sources: "Divorce – Judaism 101 (JewFAQ)", "Divorce – JewishEncyclopedia.com", "Wikipedia", "Divorce in the Old Testament – International Standard Bible Online", "David Amram – The Jewish Law of Divorce", "Matthew Henry on Deut 24"

God did not condone divorce in the Old Testament, but because of the callous behavior of men in "*sending away*" (kicking out) wives who in some way displeased them, God laid out the process a man must follow if he wished to divorce his wife. He must give her a "*Certificate of Divorce*" if he found her "*lacking favor due to some indecency*" (Deut. 24:1-4). This certificate served as legal proof that it was the husband who had broken the marriage covenant, and so protected the woman from being falsely accused of adultery, as well as granting her certain legal rights and the *Ketubah Payment* (explained below). Without this "*Certificate of Divorce*", the woman would likely become destitute, not having a means of support, not having legal right to her children, and not allowed to have possessions or to remarry (considered adultery since she was technically still married).

Men did not face this same stigma of adultery if they remarried after "*sending away*" their wives. Due to the influence of pagan nations, polygamy was accepted (even among the Patriarchs), and being technically still married to their previous wife did not impede them getting married again.

The main reason the Jews had been abandoning their wives without giving them a "*Certificate of Divorce*" was so that they did not have to pay the *Ketubah* payment [*The Ketubah amount served as a disincentive for the husband contemplating divorcing his wife: he would need to have the amount in order to be able to pay to his wife upon divorcing her. The minimum obligation was 200 silver denaria, which she could then use to support herself – Wikipedia*]. At Moses' time, it had become common for men to skip this *Certificate of Divorce* to avoid making this payment, and callously just "*send away*" their wife who had displeased them into a life of poverty. Thus God's command that they give their wife a "*Certificate of Divorce*" if their wife had not actually been guilty of some sexual immorality.

It is noteworthy for our study that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is not placed in the section of the Deuteronomic law dealing with marriage (Deut 22:13-30), but in the section dealing with theft.

Deuteronomy 24 indicates that this "*Certificate of Divorce*" must be given if the husband divorced his wife due to some uncleanness. [*This uncleanness must mean something less than adultery; for, for that, she was to die (Deut. 22:22); ... but it means either a light carriage, or a cross froward disposition, or some loathsome sore or disease; nay, some of the Jewish writers suppose that an offensive breath might be a just ground for divorce. – Matthew Henry*]. "*The OT permits divorce for a variety of fundamental violations of the marriage covenant. The reason why "something indecent" is not specified is because the law is not attempting to define conditions under which a person may divorce – although it assumes that such conditions exist. Instead the law is primarily concerned with protecting women from being callously abandoned.* (*Old Testament Perspectives on Divorce and Remarriage – Joe Sprinkle*)

Over the years, the Old Testament Jews had twisted and distorted Moses' command, through which God wished to protect women, to be a *permission* to divorce women for minor cause. Divorce became acceptable if the wife's cooking wasn't up to par or her makeup was no longer doing the job.

At the time of Jesus, the policy of giving a legal "*Certificate of Divorce*" had, for the most part, ended. The Romans (who governed Judea) did not provide a legal "*Certificate of Divorce*" process, and most of the Jews, Samaritans and others under Roman rule had defaulted to the Roman easy, no-fault, walk-out divorce. Stoning for adultery had been abolished. Women also had more freedoms under the Romans, and it was not unusual to see women walking out of their marriages. Divorces and remarriages were common – an example is the Samaritan woman who had been married 5 times (John 4). Interestingly, her 5 marriages didn't seem to have affected her reputation (John 4:39) – a further example of how common divorce and remarriage had become at that time.

It is necessary to remember this history as we study Jesus' words on the subject. When Jesus discussed the subject of divorce, He was speaking to an audience that had grown up with the false idea that Moses had given a checklist to follow to easily get out of marriages. He was speaking to an audience governed by Roman law – the listeners would be familiar with the Roman policy of “walking away” without a legal ‘*Certificate of Divorce*’. *“This Roman method of divorce held great financial implications for the Jews. For if a wife were simply sent away, rather than legally divorced as directed in Deuteronomy 24, the woman would have no legal right to her dowry, which she would’ve had, had she been legally divorced, according to Jewish law (David Amram, The Jewish Law of Divorce).*

Jesus was speaking to the Jews’ past and current abuses of marriage and divorce when He used the Greek equivalents to Moses’ words: **ἀπολῦσα** (callously “send away, put away, discharge, dismiss”) and **ἀποστασιον** (the legal “*Certificate of Divorce*”). Note His use of these terms in the verses below.

~~~~~ PART ONE – NT BIBLE REFERENCES ~~~~~

Matt. 5:31-32: Jesus, speaking about “sending away” and Certificates of Divorce

Their attitude towards divorce was not the only distortion of God’s Word found among the Pharisees of Jesus time, but one of many. Jesus attempted to clarify some of these distortions in His “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5:21ff). One-by-one, Jesus dismantles their corrupt distortions (unjustified anger, lust is ok, false swearing, eye for an eye, how to respond to others).

Finally, in verses 31-32, Jesus touches on the Pharisees’ evil manipulation of the Old Testament protection God had given women. Jesus tells His listeners *“It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away (ἀπολυσῃ) his wife, let him give her a writing of divorce (ἀποστασιον): But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away (ἀπολυσῃ) his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced (ἀπολελυμενη – should also be translated “put away”) committeth adultery.”* I am using the KJV here, since it is a more accurate translation of the Greek. Many translations substitute the phrase “put away” with the word “divorce”, which tends to become confusing since **ἀπολυσῃ** does not refer to a legal divorce, but to the common practice of Moses’ (and also Jesus’) time of “*sending away*” their wives without a “*Certificate of Divorce*”. The command is to give their wives a legal “*Certificate of Divorce*”, which would prevent the women from being falsely labeled as guilty of adultery. With this legal document, women would maintain their reputation. The only time her husband could *send her away* (put away, dismiss, abandon), would be if she had actually committed some act of sexual immorality.

With these words, Jesus is referring specifically to the Pharisaic distortion of Moses’ words, this “hardness of heart” – this callous “*sending away*” of their wife for minor issues would force her to marry someone else (thus becoming an adulteress) or else become a prostitute to avoid poverty.

“It has been said.... moreover I say” – Jesus is not modifying Moses’ command, He is emphasizing it. It is wrong to “*send away*” your wife without a “*certificate of divorce*” unless she is actually guilty of sexual immorality. These verses deal with protecting the reputation of women – this is why Jesus spoke against “*sending away*” and did not use the word for “*legal divorce*”

“The reason why the man caused the woman’s adultery by sending her away and she went to another is because she was still lawfully married to him. He dealt with her treacherously by not giving her a divorce, therefore not fulfilling the conditions of the Ketubah which required him to return the dowry if he divorced her. Being destitute she would seek another to take care of her because she could not survive on her own. If the man is vindictive he could then accuse her of adultery and have her stoned. What Jesus was saying was that the man was the cause of it because he did not follow the Torah on how to properly divorce a woman. (1) there was no cause, (2) there was not a writ of divorce, (3) he did not put it in her hand, and he skipped straight to (4) and sent her out of his house. This is separation, not divorce. (Source lost in my notes – GAO).

SECTION SUMMARY: In Matthew 5:21ff, with the repeated words “*It has been said . . . moreover I say . . .*”, Jesus refers to several abuses of Old Testament Law. One of these abuses has to do with men callously abandoning their wives (referring to Deut. 24:1-4). I translate this verse “*It has been said, Whoever shall send away (ἀπολυσῃ) his wife, let him give her a legal certificate of divorce (ἀποστασιον): Moreover, I say unto you, that whoever shall send away (ἀπολυσῃ) his wife (without giving her a legal certificate of divorce), except for the cause of fornication, causes her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is sent away (ἀπολελυμενη) commits adultery.*” The reference to Deuteronomy, as well as the historical situation at that time supports this translation.

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Matt. 19:3-9: Jesus, speaking about “sending away” and Certificates of Divorce

Here we see the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus with a question about the lawfulness of “sending away” one’s wife. At this time the Romans governed Judea, and Roman law, unlike Torah Law, did not require a certificate of divorce to end a marriage. All a man under Roman law had to do was send his wife away. They were trying to get Jesus to speak against Roman policy (the Pharisees at other times also tried to trick Jesus into speaking against the government – eg. Matthew 22:20).

The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) his wife for just any reason?” And He answered and said to them, ‘Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate (χωριζέτω “put asunder”). They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce (ἀποστασιον “declaration of independence”), and to put her away (ἀπολυσαι “send away, put away, dismiss”)?” He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced (ἀπολῦσα “sent away, put away, dismissed”) commits adultery.”

It is again important to note Scripture’s distinct use of the two words *ἀπολῦσα* (send away, put away, dismiss) and *ἀποστασιον* (certificate of divorce, declaration of independence). They have two different meanings. Unfortunately, the NKJV here obscures the difference by translating *ἀπολῦσα* as “divorce” (instead of “send away”). This gives the incorrect impression of a “legitimate” divorce, thereby changing the meaning of Jesus’ words. It is understandable why this mistranslation has confused so many people. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that it is wrong to “send away” their wife *without* the “*Certificate of Divorce*” unless she has actually been guilty of sexual immorality.

Jesus recognizes that these Pharisees are testing Him, trying to get Him to make a statement that they could use to destroy His rising popularity or claim He was rebelling against the Romans. Recognizing the trick question, Jesus responded by reiterating God’s plan for marriage, in that what “*God has put together, let not man separate*”. Jesus then stated that it was because of the “hardness of their hearts” (referring to how the men had been callously dismissing their wives), that Moses had set up a process to ensure women were not left destitute. Note again that Jesus here uses the word *ἀπολῦσα* (send away, put away, dismiss), He is not referring to the legal document of divorce, but to the callous “*sending away*” of their wives *without* the “*Certificate of Divorce*”.

These Pharisees were not asking about divorce from the standpoint of protecting women – they were asking if a man can divorce his wife for any reason. First century Jewish men could ditch their wives for any minor inconvenience. The woman then would lose her home, her security, her honor, and even her children. Jesus, with these words, was not cracking down on innocent people, he was cracking down on men abusing power. When Jesus said that remarriage is adultery, he is telling these Pharisees that you can’t just throw a woman away and pretend it is righteous. He is confronting the exploitation, not creating a lifelong punishment for those who are trying to survive in a destructive marriage. (source lost in my notes – GAO)

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A modifier is added! In Matthew 19, Jesus now introduces a modifier to the concept of divorce (this modifier is also included in the Mark, Luke and I Corinthians verses on the subject). He says “*whoever divorces* (ἀπολῦσα, callously sends away) . . . and marries another is guilty of adultery.” This is a direct response to the Pharisees who were callously abandoning their wives (not giving them a “*Certificate of Divorce*”) with the intention of marrying someone else. Jesus is saying that the sin is the combination of abandonment and remarriage (the remarriage breaks the “*one flesh*”, to which Jesus refers in 19:5). It is also imperative to note that the Greek clearly indicates Jesus is referring to the callous abandonment of wives as part of the sin, not the legal *Certificate of Divorce*. It is the callous abandonment of wives with the intention of marrying someone else that is the sin.

SECTION SUMMARY: Jesus responds to the Pharisees who are trying to trick him into making a statement they can use to combat His rising popularity. Jesus continues using distinct words to refer to the callous abandonment of wives as opposed to giving them the legal *Certificate of Divorce*. He adds a modifier (from His earlier statement in Matthew 5:31-32), saying that “*whoever divorces* (ἀπολῦσα, callously sends away) . . . and marries another is guilty of adultery.”

My translation of Jesus’ words: “*He said to them, “Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to send away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever sends away his wife (without a Certification of Divorce), except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is sent away commits adultery.”* The Jews would understand this translation based upon the reference to Deuteronomy, the specific words used by Jesus, as well as because of the current divorce policies of the Pharisees and Romans.

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### **Mark 10:11,12: Jesus, speaking about “sending away” and Certificates of Divorce**

This is probably Mark’s account of Matthew 19, where we see the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus with this question about the lawfulness of putting away one’s wife. Notice here, again, the distinction of the words in the Greek, although the NKJV translates them both as “divorce”.

*“The Pharisees came and asked Him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) his wife?” testing Him. And He answered and said to them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce (ἀποστασιον “declaration of independence”), and to dismiss (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) her.” And Jesus answered and said to them, “Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, “Whoever divorces (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”) her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”*

The Jews answered Jesus that Moses permitted them to give their wives a legal “*Certificate of Divorce*” before dismissing them. Since this was not common practice at this time, the Jews were probably hoping to twist Jesus’ answer to counter His rising popularity. Jesus reiterates that Moses was not giving permission, but had commanded this solely because of the hardness of their hearts towards their wives. He then reiterates that marriage was established to be a lifelong relationship between husbands and wives.

Note here again Jesus’ inclusion of the modifier to the “*sending away*” (ἀπολῦσα “send away, put away, dismiss”): He adds “*and marries another*”. The Greek makes it clear that it is BOTH the callous abandonment AND the remarriage that is considered the sin. Jesus states this clearly, because this was the primary reason the Pharisees abandoned their wives – to marry someone else. The remarriage was breaking the “*one flesh*”.

## **Luke 16:18: Jesus speaks about “sending away” a spouse and remarriage**

*“Whoever divorces (ἀπολυω “send away, put away, dismiss”) his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced (ἀπολελυμενη “sent away, put away, dismissed”) from her husband commits adultery.”*

The Greek shows that Jesus is not talking about the legal *“Certificate of Divorce”*, but of a husband cruelly abandoning his wife, leaving her to fend for herself, while he marries someone else. The sin is cruelly abandoning his wife AND marrying someone else.

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## **I Cor. 7:10-11: Paul answers a question about marriage and separation**

The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7, is responding to *specific* questions about marriage, separation and sexuality. He does not quote the questions, however one question appears to have revolved around separating with the intention of marrying someone else. “Not acceptable!” He responds: *“A wife is not to depart (χωρισθηνα “be separated”) from her husband. But even if she does depart (χωρισθηνα “be separated”), let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce (ἀφιετω “abandon”) his wife..”* (I Corinthians 7:10-11).

Note that Paul emphasizes the importance of a lifetime union, but recognizes that there may be times that a wife may need to separate from her husband, and in that situation he commands her not to remarry (for that would be breaking the “one flesh” bond). Note that Paul simply commands a husband not to abandon his wife. Also notice that neither of the words used here refer to a legal *“Certificate of Divorce”* – the Greek word means “be separated”. Paul does not indicate that getting a *“Certificate of Divorce”* is a sin – the sin is the separation with the subsequent remarriage (which breaks the “one flesh”). Paul here makes it clear that if remarriage is your reason to get a divorce, stop! You either remain unmarried or reconcile.

Note, also, Paul’s words here: *“let her remain unmarried”* – this indicates she had received a *“Certificate of Divorce”*. From this we can conclude that Paul was acknowledging the existence of a legal document (*“Certificate of Divorce”*) in the Corinthian situation, but he makes no comment about that being sinful – only if she remarries would she be committing the sin (breaking the “one flesh”)

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## **I Cor. 7:10-11: Paul answers a question about spousal abandonment**

In this same section of I Corinthians 7, Paul answers a question about a person living with an unbelieving spouse. He then follows up with the comment that if a spouse abandons the believer, he/she is no longer bound in the marriage: *“But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce (ἀφιετω “abandon”) her. And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce (ἀφιετω “abandon”) him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever departs (χωριζεται “separates”), let him depart (χωριζεσθω “separate”); a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?”*

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## Romans 7:1ff: Paul talks about a spouse dying

*"For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress."*

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### The big question: Is getting a "Certificate of Divorce" sinful?

As we look at the Bible verses dealing with separation from marriage, neither Jesus nor Paul calls getting a "Certificate of Divorce" a sin. They do say, however, that it is wrong to abandon the spouse *without* giving them a "Certificate of Divorce". They furthermore say it is a sin to remarry after a divorce (ἀπολῦσα "send away, put away, dismiss") if adultery wasn't the issue. Both Jesus and Paul recognized that, because of the hardness of men's hearts, a "Certificate of Divorce" to formalize separation is sometimes necessary.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ PART TWO – HARDNESS OF HEART ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

### What are some New Testament examples of the "Hardness of men's hearts"?

Unfortunately in our day, just as in the days of Moses, Jesus and Paul, many people *have hardness in their hearts* towards others. In the Old Testament, Moses referred to the cruel abandonment of wives without the proper documentation as an example of the "hardness of man's hearts". Jesus refers to this in both Matthew and Mark. The apostle Paul, in several of his epistles, also speaks of those who treat others in an evil and cruel way. In his second letter to Timothy, he wrote: *"There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholly, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.* (2 Tim. 3:1-5. Cf. also Eph. 5:3-7: *"Do not be partners with them"* and 1 Cor. 5:11-13 *"Purge the evil person from among you... Do not even eat with them"*).

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### Can Paul's examples of "Hardness of Heart" refer to today's marriages?

As we see in Jesus' and Paul's words, receiving a "Certificate of Divorce" is not the sin, but the callous treatment of one's spouse. Although Paul's words above to Timothy do not speak specifically of marriage or divorce, it speaks very clearly about God's attitude towards callous behavior. If a person is treating any believer (which would include their spouse) in an evil or cruel way, the Bible is clear on how the believer should react – *"Have nothing to do with them"*, *"Do not be partners with them"*, *"Purge them from you"*, *"Do not even eat with them"*. God makes it quite clear in these Bible verses that His believers are not to remain in relationships that are dangerous to their bodies, minds or souls. *"But as for you,...flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. (I Tim. 6:11). "Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them"* (Eph. 5:11). *"Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."* (1 Cor. 15:33).

So, yes – these examples can apply to today's marriages. Nowhere in Scripture does the Lord exempt Christians from seeking protection from cruel and abusive spouses. Requiring someone to remain in an abusive marriage is not Scriptural, nor is it love. Paul's words in I Corinthians 7:10-11 would recognize such a situation as this, in which a spouse, to protect themselves,

(physically, emotionally, psychologically) would separate from, even get a “*Certificate of Divorce*” from their cruel spouse. The caveat is that they cannot marry someone else, because that would break the “one flesh” bond. Paul is not saying that it is a sin to get a “*Certificate of Divorce*”, but that it is a sin to remarry if adultery isn’t the issue. The question here is not “*Is divorce a sin?*”, but rather “*Is the abuse so bad and with no hope of change that I’d rather be alone than married?*”

Some people may wish to question whether this caveat only applies if the person separates/divorces with the intention of getting married to someone else, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. From the Greek usage, neither Jesus nor Paul said that getting a “*Certificate of Divorce*” and remarriage is a sin. The Greek shows that callously SENDING AWAY and remarriage is the sin. There is a great difference of meaning between “send away” and “*Certificate of Divorce*”. The discussion of remarriage after getting a “*Certificate of Divorce*” may be discussed in a future update.

### ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ PART THREE – THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

#### **Divorce was not part of God’s perfect plan for mankind.**

Divorce (either *αποστασιον* or *ἀπολῦσα*) was not part of God’s perfect plan for mankind. In the beginning, God set up marriage to be a permanent co-dependent union, with the husband primarily responsible for the general welfare and protection of the family and the wife primarily responsible for maintaining the home and caring for the children. Each had a role to fill. In order to prevent chaos and ensure a peaceful union, God established the husband as the leader of the family and commanded that the wife recognize that headship (i.e., submit to it). “*The LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him*” (Gen. 2:18). “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*” {Matt. 19:5-6}. “*Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church*” (Eph. 5:22, 23). “*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself*” (Eph. 5:25-28).

Throughout the Bible God emphasized that marriage was to be a permanent, co-dependent and peaceful union, and showed the importance of faithful marriages to meet the needs of both the husband and wife and for the proper development of their children. Just like everything else that God created, marriage was very good.

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#### **Sin shattered God’s perfect creation**

And then entered sin. The perfect relationship between God and mankind was shattered. The perfect partnership and trust between husband and wife was also shattered (as we saw with Adam immediately blaming Eve for getting them into the mess [Genesis 3:12]). Clear-cut responsibilities became blurred. Abuses entered into marriages with the wife rebelling against her husband’s headship, and the husband abusing the submission of the wife. Because of the “hardness of men’s hearts” – their refusal to properly honor the covenant of marriage made with their spouses – God recognized the necessity of a “*Certificate of Divorce*” in the OT (Deut. 21:10-16, 24:1-4). Likewise, in our time, due to the hardness of men’s (and women’s) hearts, the marriage covenant (*to be faithful, love, honor, nurture, cherish, respect*) is sometimes broken.

## ~~~~~ PART FOUR – OUR PASTORAL MINISTRY ~~~~~

### How this applies to our Pastoral Ministry

An important part of pastoral care in our congregations has always been marriage counselling. Two people come to the pastor looking for help to mend their shattered partnership. Using God's commands and promises, we show them the partnership that God desires for them. We remind them of their responsibilities towards each other and the resulting promises God has given for their marriage. We remind them that although there will be sin in their marriage towards each other, their marriage should also be one of continual repentance and forgiveness.

But, what if one of them does not want to heal the broken marriage nor fulfil their obligations in the marriage covenant (to be faithful, love, honor, nurture, cherish, respect)? What if he or she narcissistically continues in the way that crushes the spouse? Do we continue to encourage the victim to "forgive" and "work harder" at appeasing the abuser, or recognize the physical/ emotional/ psychological and spiritual harm **that Scripture tells us** the unrepentant abuser is doing to the victim (2 Tim. 3:1-5, Eph. 5:3-7, 1 Cor. 5:11-13)?

Our question may be how to determine if the "victim" is telling the truth. How do we deal with a person who is considering a divorce when they cannot prove their accusations of abuse? Do we continue treating them as a fully redeemed child of God, or due to the lack of proof should we follow the discipline steps of Matthew 18:15-18 to force them back into the marriage? How do we determine non-visible and unproven abandonment of affection or emotional / psychological / financial / verbal / physical abuse? Can we comfortably say "if abuse cannot be proven, it didn't happen"? This is why counselling sessions with the couple are imperative, and their responses will help determine the path to move forward. A refusal to attend counselling or to follow counselling advice can very well indicate guilt and an unrepentant heart. If unsure, we can always trust God's judgment in creating the caveat "do not remarry" in weeding out those who are not truly abused.

### Protecting the wife as the "weaker vessel" & the Marriage Covenant

Women can and have abused their husbands. Scripture, however, indicates special concern about men taking advantage of their "headship" over the wife God has given them, and has issued commands for the protection of wives. There are both physical and emotional differences between men and women, and based on these differences the Bible calls the woman the "weaker vessel". Since the wife has put her life, trust and heart into her husband's hands, the husband is tasked with protecting her life, trust and heart. **"Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel"** (1 Peter 3:3-6). **"Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church"** (Eph. 5:28-29). Paul also lists the responsibilities of the wife towards the marriage: **"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything"** (Ephesians 5:22-24). These words summarize the marriage covenant.

<sup>6</sup> The makeup of the marriage covenant is clearly defined in Scripture, and Scripture clearly shows that the marriage covenant includes much more than sexual faithfulness. It is not only adultery that breaks this covenant. When a woman is suffering ongoing emotional, psychological, verbal or physical harm from the man whom God has commanded in the marriage covenant to **love, nourish** and **cherish** (Eph. 5:28-29), he has broken/abandoned that marriage covenant. When the wife is refusing to respect the man God has placed as leader of the family by subjecting him to emotional, psychological, verbal or physical harm, she has broken/abandoned that marriage covenant.

The apostle Paul furthermore warns, **"If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever"** (1 Tim. 5:8). (page 8)

## **“Grounds” for divorce & broken marriage covenants.**

Many believe that the only actions that break a marriage covenant, and therefore the only actions that are “grounds for divorce”, are adultery and physical abandonment. This disregards the historical context of Jesus’ and Paul’s words, as well as the Greek’s clear distinction between “sending or putting away”, “separation”, and “*Certificate of Divorce*”. Jesus’ words in the gospel references show that He is speaking against callous “*sending away*” and not against the “*Certificate of Divorce*”. Just as importantly, these “grounds for divorce” ignore the “remarriage” caveat given by both Jesus and Paul, which clearly shows it is not the divorce, but the subsequent remarriage which is the sin. We can and should recognize that there are also other abuses which also break the marriage covenant (to be faithful, love, honor, nurture, cherish, respect), recognizing that the “no remarriage” caveat will dissuade divorces for trivial matters.

Furthermore, when dealing with the victim of a broken marriage covenant, we must remember that we represent Christ when we “*repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted*” (2 Thess. 1:6)? Jesus, when healing the crowds, quoted from Isaiah “*a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory*” (Matt. 12:20-21). We are also told to be “*ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2 Cor. 3:6). Jesus, Himself, showed mercy to the woman the Pharisees brought to Him who was accused of adultery (John 8:2-11). Although the Jewish law required she be stoned to death, Jesus told the accusers “*He who is without sin cast the first stone*”, before telling her to “*go and sin no more*”

Some may point out that God calls divorce a sin in Malachi (2:13-16), but it must be noted that God there calls “treacherous” divorce the sin (again, in order to protect women) - in this case it is the treachery which is the sin, not the divorce. Divorce is not God’s will, but neither is abusive treatment of other people. As the apostle Paul reminds us, we are called to be “*ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2 Cor. 3:6).

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Evil doers will destroy faith – avoid them!

Paul, in his various letters, clearly tells believers that, in order to protect themselves, they are to **have nothing to do with evildoers, to not partner with them, to purge them from your midst, to not even eat with them** (2 Tim. 3:1-5, Eph. 5:3-7, 1 Cor. 5:11-13). Do not these verses speak directly to this subject, even if the words “marriage” or “divorce” are not mentioned?

Could it perhaps be argued from Scripture that an abused Christian spouse is required to “no longer partner with” an evil partner to protect him/herself and their faith? (*In Ezra 10:10-12, God commanded the Jews to divorce their pagan wives to protect their faith*). Or, is a Christian spouse exempt from the protection commanded by Paul to believers who face abusers? Has not an abusive man already broken/abandoned the marriage covenant to love, honor, nourish and cherish his wife? Has not an abusive woman already broken/abandoned the marriage covenant to honor and respect her husband? How can a conscientious pastor tell a person they must remain in an abusive situation which *Scripture says will* be detrimental to their spiritual, emotional, psychological, and/or physical wellbeing? Do we not contradict Scripture which tells believers to protect themselves by getting out of abusive situations when we tell the victims they should rather work harder to appease the abuser? “*But as for you,...flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.* (I Tim. 6:11). “*Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them*” (Eph. 5:11). “*Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals.”* (1 Cor. 15:33). Old Testament examples show that God handled these types of marital abuses similarly (Deut. 21:10-16, 24:1-4, Malachi 2:16-18).

Is Verbal, Emotional or Psychological Abuse Really “Abuse”?

The detrimental effects of verbal, emotional and psychological abuse (i.e. bullying) are well known. Many articles, books, and news stories have pointed out that one terrible result of bullying is that of suicide. We may proudly proclaim *“sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me”*, however it is a fact that words do hurt, and they can cut deep.

Paul, in his letter to Timothy, covers this subject well when he describes the people believers should avoid as *“boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, ... lovers of money, treacherous, rash, conceited...”* – the majority of behaviors having to do with non-physical abuse. ***“Avoid them”***.

Jesus points out the hurtful results of verbal and emotional abuse (i.e. bullying) when He states *“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire* (Matt 5:22) (Raca was a derogatory expression meaning “empty-headed,” insinuating a person’s stupidity or inferiority. It was an offensive name used to show utter contempt for another person.) We also recognize it is a sin to ridicule others when we look at the meaning of the 8th commandment.

Proverbs (18:21) tells us *“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.”* This verse highlights the importance and results of our words to others. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians (4:29), *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs.”* The Lord, through the apostle, clearly teaches that we are to speak words that build others up rather than tear them down – we should encourage growth, healing and love to others. The Lord, through James (3:9-10) says *“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so”*. This clearly speaks against abusive speech. Prov 12:19 clearly states the damage done by hurtful words, *“The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”* See also Prov. 6:19, Ps. 27:12, Prov. 25:18, Matt. 15:19, Prov. 6:16-19.

The famous passage about love in 1 Corinthians 13 makes it obvious that emotional abuse is wrong. The apostle Paul describes the actions of real love. First, *“love is patient and kind”* (vs. 4). Emotional abuse is neither patient nor kind but instead is quick to flare up at small offenses. *“Love keeps no record of wrongs”* (vs 5), but emotional abuse is all about pointing out how another person is wrong in everything he does, so as to protect the ego of the abuser. *“Love is not rude or selfish or prideful or irritable or resentful”*—all unfortunate qualities of emotional abuse. Instead, *“love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”* (vs 7). Sadly, it is the *loving* person—the one who loves unconditionally—who is usually the target of emotional abuse.

Do these Bible verses in any way indicate that a verbal or emotional abuser should be tolerated? Does the Bible require that one overlook the abuse and “persevere” through the pain? The answer to both of these questions is “no.” Abuse is a learned behavior, and if we allow it to happen and continue, we are in fact enabling it- *“Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!”* (Matthew 18:7). We cannot and should not accept verbal or emotional abuse because it dishonors the Lord, can destroy faith in the victim, and it often escalates to physical abuse. Furthermore, abusing someone verbally or emotionally is not the behavior of a person walking in fellowship with the Lord.

What if the abuser repents?

If the abuser repents, and the previously abused person (victim) wishes to show grace and return to the marriage, all is well. Pastors should encourage this, as well as follow up with **frequent** counselling / encouragement. ***Do not neglect pastoral follow-up – it is imperative that the husband and wife receive ongoing counselling to deal with the possibly unresolved issues!!!***

There may be situations where the abuser verbally repents and is forgiven, but distress and shattered trust remains with the victim. In this situation, only “fruits of faith/repentance” will repair that trust (Matthew 3:8, Galatians 5:6, 22-23, John 15:8, James 2:17, Colossians 3:12-15). The pastor can support the victim’s desire to take time to heal and verify the fruits of repentance while separated from the former abuser. The apostle Paul’s words apply here: ***“Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer...”*** (I Cor. 7:5). The former abuser, if repentant, should be willing to permit this time of healing.

If the abuser does not show fruits of his/her repentance, the victim may understandably refuse to return to the abusive and broken relationship and proceed with a legal divorce.

What if a “victim” lies about abuse, or is self-centered/narcissistic and falsely believes their spouse is verbally abusive when they are actually requiring accountability or responsibility?

I understand the concern of many pastors that people may seek divorce for the wrong reason (just as the Israelites did in Moses’ and Malachi’s time, the Pharisees did at Jesus time, and the Corinthians at Paul’s time). Multiple counselling meetings between the couple and pastor/elders will usually determine if the accusations of abuse are true or if the “victim” has merely tired of the marriage and wants out. A refusal by one or the other to attend these meetings or follow counselling advice will also help determine the truth.

“Nagging” (i.e. asking the spouse to be accountable or take responsibility) is usually not abuse in itself, but yet requires counselling to help the couple learn communication skills.

If the “victim” insists upon seeking a legal divorce despite there being no evidence of the marriage covenant being broken, the pastor should point out Jesus’ and Paul’s command that if he/she follows through with the divorce, he/she are not to marry anyone else (Matt. 19:9, Mark 10:11-12, Luke 16:18, I Cor. 7:10-11). This may cause them to reconsider their desire to divorce.

The Lord has our back in these difficult decisions. If, by chance, the “victim” did mislead the pastor, we are reminded that the Lord, who can see into their heart, will deal with their deception. ***“It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come!”*** (Luke 17:1). Yes, there will be people who “play the system”, but they will face God’s wrath for doing so. ***“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.”*** (Galatians 6:7). Also, ***“Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them.”*** (Deut 32:35). The apostle Paul also warns: ***“Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off”*** (Romans 11:22).

Despite our best efforts to be good stewards of the counseling gifts God has given us, we may be misled. We realize ***“the sins of some men are obvious, going ahead of them to judgment; but the sins of others do not surface until later”*** (1 Tim. 5:24). It is not the pastor’s responsibility to become a detective in “he said / she said” matters, but to trust that God who can see into hearts, will judge according to their heart. We are guided by the apostle Paul’s reminder to be ***“ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”*** (2 Corinthians 3:6). Let us not occupy our time second guessing our pastoral ministry, but have confidence that God, in His wisdom, guides our actions and will carry out the proper resolutions in His proper time.



Some other thoughts on marriage/abuse/divorce....

A man shall leave his father and mother...

Once in my ministry, I came across a father encouraging his son to divorce a lady because he did not consider the wife good for his son's career. Our Lord who has ordained marriage stated, "*a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.*" Parents should not get involved in their children's marriage. Parents, especially, should not get involved in putting asunder what God has joined together. Just as it is sinful to be a party to murder, stealing and adultery, a parent encouraging their child to put away their spouse is as guilty as their child in causing that separation. Jesus said in Matthew 18:7, "*Woe unto the world because of occasions of stumbling! For it must needs be that the occasions come; but woe to that man through whom the occasion cometh!*" The person who causes anyone to put asunder what God has put together because he is encouraging his child to unlawfully put the spouse away is in serious trouble with the Lord.

Christians who treacherously desire to "put away their wives".

Twice in my ministry, I dealt with men from prominent Christian families who I suspected had tired of and "wanted to put away their wife", but didn't want the culpability of being the one to initiate the legal divorce. Through emotional and psychological abuse they attempted to make the marriage so abhorrent to the wife so that she would be the one to initiate the divorce and he would then be free to marry someone else "with a clear conscience". The apostle Paul speaks to this: "*There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholly, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.* (2 Tim. 3:1-5). Cf also Mal. 2:16 concerning "treacherous" divorce).

"For Better or for Worse, in Sickness or in Health".

This is a good commitment that spouses make to each other in their wedding vows. In it they promise to stand by and support their spouse through everything that life throws at them. This becomes difficult if one of the spouses develops a permanently debilitating illness or injury. Some people may have chronic emotional or psychological issues, and the spouse has likewise promised to support and encourage their spouse through these difficulties. In such situations the spouse must remember and fulfil their wedding vow to the afflicted, secure in the knowledge that the Lord will provide blessings through these difficulties (James 1:2-4, 12, I Peter 1:6, John 16:33 Romans 8:18,28,35, Romans 12:12, Proverbs 3:5-6, I Peter 4:12-13, I Thess. 5:16-18, I Cor. 10:13, Phil. 4:6-7,19, Psalm 55:8-9,22, Romans 5:3-5, Mark 4:17, James 4:7, 2 Cor. 1:3-4, Isaiah 41:10).

Satan may at times, however, tempt the afflicted to use their affliction as an "excuse" to avoid responsibilities to their spouse and marriage. Satan may also use the illness or injury to turn the afflicted into an angry and/or abusive person. The illness/injury at no time justifies such reaction from the afflicted, nor should they use their injury/illness as an excuse for such action (James 1:2-4, I Peter 1:6, John 16:33, Romans 8:18,28, Romans 12:12, James 1:12, Proverbs 3:5-6, I Peter 4:12-13, I Thessalonians 5:16-18, I Corinthians 10:13, Philippians 4:6-7,19, Psalm 55:8-9,22, Romans 5:3-5, Mark 4:17, Romans 8:35, James 4:7, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, Isaiah 41:10).

When Satan has entered such a person's heart with deceptiveness, anger and/or vileness, and he/she refuses to repent, Scripture speaks directly to this situation: "**Have nothing to do with such people**" (2 Tim. 3:1-5), "**Do not be partners with them**" (Ephesians 5:3-7), and "**Purge the evil person from among you**" (I Corinthians 5:11-13). As indicated in the previous article, we can (and should) extend this protection to the married victim of such abuse.

Addendum - Word Studies

ἀπολύω: "Send away, put away, dismiss, repudiate" (apolyo , pronounced ap-ol-oo-oh) vs.
ἀποστασιον: "Certificate of Divorce" (apostasion, pronounced: ah-pos-TAS-ee-on)

There is a large and interesting library of articles delving into the importance of recognizing the distinction between ἀπολύω ("send away, put away, dismiss") and ἀποστασιον ("Certificate of divorce", "declaration of independence"), and Jesus' use of them. Although the KJV does a good job showing this distinction, many other translations obscure the distinctions, translating both as "divorce". The Greek/English concordances that we use most often (Strong, Youngs) give the meanings: "dismiss, divorce, abandon, release", allowing for a "divorce" translation. Thayer's Greek Lexicon also gives one of the meanings as "divorce", and further explains it "to dismiss from the house, to repudiate". ἀπολύσα is used 67 times in the New Testament, and is only translated as "divorce" in connection with the Matthew 5, Matthew 19, Mark 10 and Luke 4 Bible verses.

Furthermore, the context and phrasing of the Bible verses emphasize the contrast between these two words. Add in the historical and cultural understanding of divorce at the time of Jesus, and it becomes clear that Jesus is intentionally rebuking the Pharisees for their practice of callously sending away their wives without a certificate of divorce – He makes it clear that the only time they could "send away" their wives without a certificate of divorce was if their wives had committed some sort of sexual immorality.

It is clear that Jesus, when He refers to "ἀπολύσα" in these verses, is not referring to a "formal divorce", but the evil actions of the Pharisees callously tossing aside (sending away) their wives WITHOUT a "certificate of divorce" (ἀποστασιον) and causing their wives to commit adultery because of their need to remarry to avoid destitution (or more likely, no man will want to marry them because they don't have the formal certificate of divorce from the previous husband, causing them to become prostitutes).

Below are my translations of these verses, based upon the Greek and historical context.

Matthew 5:31-32: "It has been said, Whoever shall send away his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce; Moreover I say unto you, that whoever shall send away his wife (without this certificate of divorce), except for sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery: and whoever shall marry her that is sent away commits adultery."

Matthew 19:1-3: The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to send away his wife for just any reason?" And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate. They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?" He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to send away your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever sends away his wife (without a certificate of divorce), except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is sent away commits adultery."

Mark 10:11-12: "The Pharisees came and asked Him, "Is it lawful for a man to send away his wife?" testing Him. And He answered and said to them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus answered and said to them, "Because of the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate." In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, "Whoever sends away his wife (without a certificate of divorce) and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman sends away her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

Luke 16:18: "Whoever sends away his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is sent away from her husband commits adultery."

Common Biblical Terms for Divorce

Several Hebrew and Greek words translated as “divorce” or related to divorce appear in the Bible. Each has a nuanced meaning that reveals how the ancient cultures understood and regulated divorce.

1. Sefer Keritut (סֵפֶר קְרִיטָתוֹת)

Meaning and Usage

This Hebrew phrase literally means “document of cutting off” or “certificate of divorce.” It refers to the legal written certificate given to a wife when a husband divorces her. The term appears in Deut 24:1-4 which sets rules about issuing a divorce certificate and forbids remarriage to the same husband after the woman has married another man.

Context

The certificate served as proof that the marriage covenant was officially broken. It protected the woman from being accused of adultery if she remarried. It formalized the dissolution and granted the woman certain legal rights.

Biblical References

Deuteronomy 24:1-4 describes the process and consequences of issuing the sefer keritut. Jeremiah 3:8 uses the phrase figuratively to describe Israel’s spiritual unfaithfulness to God.

2. Karat Berith (כָּרַת בְּרִית)

Meaning and Usage

This Hebrew phrase means “to cut a covenant” or “make a covenant.” While not directly referring to divorce, it highlights the covenantal nature of marriage. Marriage is seen as a covenant relationship, and divorce breaks this sacred covenant.

Context

Understanding marriage as a covenant clarifies why divorce is not taken lightly in Scripture. The breaking of this covenant through divorce is portrayed as a serious offense, often equated with breaking a sacred promise.

Biblical References

Genesis 17:2-7 uses “karat berith” in the context of God’s covenant with Abraham.

Malachi 2:14-16 emphasizes God’s hatred of divorce because it breaks the marriage covenant.

3. Talith (תַּלִּית) / Tal (תַּל)

Meaning and Usage

These Hebrew root words mean “to send away” or “to put away.” Often used to describe divorce in the Old Testament. It emphasizes the action of the husband sending his wife away, symbolizing the end of the marital relationship.

Context

Divorce was initiated by the husband in most biblical contexts. “Putting away” indicates the physical and social separation of the wife from the husband.

Biblical References

Malachi 2:16 says, “For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one’s garment with violence... Therefore take heed to your spirit...”

Matthew 5:31-32 and Matthew 19:3-9 refer to “putting away” in the Greek equivalent (apoluo).

4. Apoluo (ἀπολύω)

Meaning and Usage

This is the primary Greek word used in the New Testament to mean “to send away,” “dismiss,” or “divorce.” It refers to the husband divorcing or sending away his wife. The word is significant in Jesus’ teaching on marriage and divorce.

Context

Apoluo reflects the social act of dissolution of marriage in the Greco-Roman world. The New Testament discusses apoluo in the context of Jesus’ referring to the hardness of human hearts and God’s original intention for marriage.

Biblical References

Matt 5:31-32, Matt 19:3-9, Mark 10:2-12, Luke 16:18 use apoluo in Jesus’ discussions on divorce. Paul uses it in 1 Corinthians 7 to address marriage and separation.

5. Chorizo (χωρίζω)

Meaning and Usage

Greek word meaning “to separate,” “to divide,” or “to put asunder.” Used less frequently than apoluo but related to separation. Emphasizes the physical and relational separation in marriage dissolution.

Context

Highlights the division and separation resulting from divorce. Used metaphorically in some New Testament passages to indicate separation or division.

Biblical References

Luke 16:18 uses both apoluo and chorizo to describe divorce and remarriage. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 uses a form of chorizo in the context of separation.

6. Agnoeo (ἀγνοέω)

Meaning and Usage

Greek word meaning “to be ignorant” or “to not know.” While not a direct term for divorce, it appears in contexts discussing marital ignorance or unawareness that affects marriage.

Context

Used in 1 Corinthians 7:5 regarding abstaining from marital relations. Reflects relational issues that might indirectly lead to separation or conflict.

7. Moicheia (μοιχεία)

Meaning and Usage

Greek term meaning “adultery.” Not a term for divorce, but closely linked because biblical grounds for divorce often include adultery.

Context

Adultery is presented in the Bible as a breach of the marriage covenant. It is a key reason Jesus permits divorce (Matthew 19:9).

Biblical References

Exodus 20:14 (The Ten Commandments) prohibits adultery. Matthew 19:9 permits “putting away” in case of sexual immorality (porneia), often interpreted as adultery.