

Foreword by William A. Heth

The biblical teaching on divorce and remarriage is clouded by the question of whether or not a duly covenanted and consummated marriage results in a mystical, ontological, indissoluble union which is permanent this side of death. Something close to that conception is the prism through which I once read the biblical passages on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, as have many others.

For me, the genesis of the assumption that marriage creates a near-indissoluble union came early in my seminary studies when an author I was reading made a statement to this effect. I found evidence for this in the kinship laws in Leviticus 18 which are rooted in the Genesis 2:24 concept that husband and wife become 'one flesh' or related kin. I argued that marriage creates vertical blood relationships in the form of children and horizontal 'one flesh' relationships between spouses that are just as permanent. Further, the Levitical prohibitions seemed to endure the death of one of the links in the relationship.

I saw further evidence for marriage permanence in Jesus' teaching in Matthew and Mark when, after quoting Genesis 2:24, Jesus repeated so as to stress 'So they are no longer two but one flesh.' Neither Mark, Luke, nor Paul seemed to be aware of the Matthean exception permitting remarriage after divorce for adultery, and when Paul did specifically address the possibility of a second marriage, in both contexts he connected it to the death of one of the spouses (1 Cor. 7:39; Rom. 7:2-3).

But twenty years into my ongoing study I was confronted with concepts that undermined what I thought was a tight case. I had to admit that when a man marries a woman they do not *literally* become 'one flesh'. The point of ancient Near Eastern covenants was to establish a relationship through a volitional commitment that included obligations with someone who was *not* a relative. Covenants were the vehicle for extending the loyalties that attended kinship relationships to unrelated entities. Thus the one flesh marriage relationship does *not* make husbands and wives as closely related as they will be to their own flesh and blood children.

Though still debated, I also came to the conclusion that covenants could be broken when the responsibilities pledged were not forthcoming. Adultery was such a serious violation of the marriage covenant throughout the ancient Near East and in the Old Testament that it could be punished by death. If adultery was not only an offense committed against an injured husband, but also an offense committed against God (Gen. 20:6-10; Psalm 51:4), then I had to admit that Jesus, the Son of God, may have made an exception for the permanence of marriage in the face of this sin.

I also somehow missed that Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:15, 'the brother or sister is not bound in such circumstances' (NIV), is a virtual negative restatement of the essential formula in the Jewish bill of divorce 'You are free to marry any man' (*m. Git.* 9:3). I can now sympathize with the candid point made by one New Testament background specialist when he said if Paul wanted to say that remarriage was not permitted, he said precisely the opposite of what he meant. And since Paul envisioned another situation that admitted of remarriage, this also meant that the unqualified version of Jesus' divorce sayings were never meant to be understood as exceptionless absolutes.

Finally, with David Instone-Brewer and others, I concluded that the only way to make sense of Jesus' teaching that the one who remarries after divorce commits adultery is to assume that the divorce was invalid. Matthew's account makes this assumption explicit and essentially endorses the Shammaite reading Deuteronomy 24:1 that divorce is permitted, not commanded, in such situations.

But how can we be sure? And what about 1 Corinthians 6:16 where Paul cites a portion of Genesis 2:24: 'Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two

will become one flesh” (ESV). Some recent studies argue that Paul’s citation of Genesis 2:24 means he believed sexual relations with a literal prostitute *do* create an ontological union. How do we address these and other questions that still cloud the skies of how to responsibly understand and apply the biblical teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage today?

This is where Colin Hamer’s amazing study enters in. This conceptually integrative study on *Marital Imagery in the Bible* uses both traditional metaphor theory and more recent developments in concept mapping to engage the considerable corpus of published material that considers marital imagery in Scripture. Hamer shows there is no evidence that Jewish or Christian marriage teaching is rooted in the Genesis 2:23 *literal* flesh and blood connection of the primal couple. This neoplatonic model of indissoluble marriage patterned after the original couple first appears in the intertestamental period, and even there the evidence is scanty; nor is the primal couple marriage model a part of the implied readership of the New Testament. Rather, Hamer shows that the conceptual domain for marital imagery in the Bible is sourced in the Genesis 2:24 teaching that a woman becomes the wife of a man in a *metaphoric* one-flesh union formed by means of a volitional, conditional covenant. Hamer cross-maps this through the Pentateuch and the Prophets to *Yawveh: the Husband of Israel* and in the Gospels and Apocalypse to *Jesus: The Bridegroom of the Church* and more.

In short, the teaching of Jesus and Paul is rooted in and informed by marital imagery found throughout Scripture, and this imagery can be used as a hermeneutical tool to help sort out disputed New Testament texts. Marital imagery, according to metaphor theory, must have a source domain that is rooted in the experience of the intended audience if it is going to mean anything, and any exegesis of the New Testament teaching on mundane marriage should cohere with the marital imagery it employs. Hamer points out that as divorce and remarriage is central to all the Bible’s marital imagery, it would be expected that both concepts will be evidenced in contemporary marriage practice and New Testament teaching.

The reader is in for a surprise, too, when Hamer addresses a common assumption by those who hold more restrictive views of divorce and remarriage, namely that gender reciprocity in New Testament divorce teaching can be assumed. Actually, Hamer argues this is an ill-founded assumption given the social milieu, relies on two improbable assumptions about the one and only statement in the Gospels addressing the matter from the wife’s perspective (Mark 10:12), is incongruent with the New Testament’s own marital imagery, and ultimately curtails a wife’s freedom of action. Hamer’s comprehensive study reveals that under the Old Testament economy, a wife already had divorce grounds more broadly based than those of her husband. The logic of Exodus 21:10-11 not only granted this, but also reveals that 1 Corinthians 7:15 is neither a ‘Pauline privilege’ nor an additional ground for divorce introduced by Paul, as I once argued. Paul is merely articulating Old Testament principles.

Hamer’s appeal to marital imagery throughout Scripture and how it informs our understanding of the New Testament teaching on divorce and remarriage is brilliant. There are pastoral implications as well, though not directly addressed in this study. Simply put, at issue is how does one become ‘one flesh’ with another? Is it by a sexual act or by means of a conditional, volitional covenant? Hamer shows that it is the latter. So a woman becomes one flesh with her husband—a member of his family; a believer becomes one flesh with Christ—a member of Christ’s body; and an unbeliever is one flesh with a ‘prostitute’—which Hamer explains represents membership of the unbelieving world (as in Rev. 17—21)—all by means of a covenant. This clarifies in particular the marriage relationship. To say, for example, Jesus teaches that marriage is ‘more binding’ than his contemporaries taught should not focus our attention on the impossibility of ‘breaking’ a near indissoluble bond formed by sexual union. Instead, our focus should be on covenant commitments, on loyal love, on mutual responsibilities, on integrity, on ethical living, and on the maintenance and care of spouses and children (cf. Exod. 21:10-11; Eph. 5:25-29) in accordance with the character of a life lived with the desire to please God.

This study builds on the work of Instone-Brewer and, in my view, confirms it. At a time when the Church of Rome is re-thinking its understanding of divorce and remarriage perhaps those of us not within that faith community should be doing the same. Hamer only briefly touches on the pastoral issues raised, so it is for those with pastoral responsibilities to work out in practice the implications of the exegesis of the New Testament divorce and remarriage passages contained here. I hope it is widely read.

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