

Arguments For and Against the Betrothal Interpretation

Arguments For:

1. THE JEWISH CONTEXT:

Matthew writes for a Jewish audience, and betrothal was primarily a Jewish custom. Furthermore, only Matthew includes an “exception clause.” Therefore, by his unique usage of the exception clause Matthew must have intended the clause to address this distinctly Jewish custom of betrothal for his intended audience.

BUT – the argument fails because the issue of “betrothal” does not account for *all* of the differences between Matthew and Mark’s account of the same incident. It is more likely that the distinctly Jewish interest in the rabbinic Hillel-Shammai debate is what accounts for the unique way that Matthew records both – the *question* posed by the Pharisees and the corresponding *answer* given by Christ (including the exception clause). Neither Mark’s Roman audience nor Luke’s Greek audience cared about old rabbinic debates.

2. THE SHOCKED RESPONSE OF THE DISCIPLES

This argument assumes that since Jesus essentially sided with the School of Shammai by permitting divorce on the grounds of sexual immorality, then the disciples shouldn’t have been shocked. Jesus would have been saying nothing new here.

BUT – this is not true. Jesus taught that neither Hillel nor Shammai were correct, and He differed significantly with Shammai in that (1) He taught divorce for immorality was an *option*, not an expectation or a moral obligation, and (2) more importantly, He taught that if a divorce had occurred for any reason other than immorality, then remarriage subsequent to such a groundless divorce was forbidden. Jesus’ restriction of remarriage solely to the grounds of “fornication” is sufficient to account for the surprised reaction of the disciples.

3. EXONERATES JOSEPH FOR DIVORCING MARY

The argument is that Jesus and Matthew (who records His life and teachings) both consciously include the exception clause because they must take pains to “exonerate” Joseph for seeking to divorce Mary when he learned of her pregnancy. Joseph & Mary, of course, were still only betrothed – not yet married - and thus Jesus is explaining why was it was okay for Joseph to get a divorce. In this regard, note that only Matthew records Joseph’s intent to divorce Mary, and correspondingly only Matthew records the “exception” for betrothal.

BUT – there is no advantage here to the betrothal interpretation because both the traditional Protestant interpretation (the so-called “Erasmian” view) and the betrothal interpretation equally serve to exonerate Joseph of any wrongdoing. For example, utilizing the rabbinic interpretational principle of “reasoning from the greater to the lesser,” any first century Jew would conclude that if divorce from the “greater” institution of marriage is acceptable on the grounds infidelity, then surely divorce from the “lesser” institution of betrothal would also be allowed on the same grounds. Thus, the Erasmian interpretation (that Jesus permits divorce from a marriage on the grounds of infidelity) exonerates Joseph just as well as the betrothal view.

4. **THE DEATH PENALTY WAS THE REMEDY FOR ADULTERY**

This argument is based upon the Law of Moses (Deut. 22:22) which prescribes the death penalty for adultery.

BUT – this argument is logically self-defeating because the Law of Moses also prescribed stoning as a penalty for “betrothal infidelity” (Deut. 22:21). Thus, by this logic Jesus could be speaking of dissolving neither a marriage nor a betrothal. Then what *is* He speaking about? This is perhaps the weakest argument, so it is not urged by all betrothal advocates.

The argument also fails to account for the historical and cultural reality that Jews had long been substituting divorce as a compassionate remedy for infidelity in lieu of stoning. This cultural practice seems to have the approval of God Himself (cp. Isa. 50:1 and Jer. 3:8 where God does not speak figuratively of “stoning” Israel for her spiritual infidelity, but rather of “divorcing” her.) Certainly, in the NT Joseph was “just” in choosing merely to divorce Mary instead of seeking to stone her; obviously, then, God approved of the substitution.

Of course, permanence advocates cannot concede that God would ever have approved of divorce – even in lieu of stoning (yet, they *must* concede this point in the case of betrothal). Thus, this argument puts the first century Jew in the position of choosing between one of two remedies: (1) stone the woman, and then freely remarry (because the spouse is dead, the marriage is dissolved), or (2) forgive the woman and remain married, even if she remains unrepentant. Due to the “hardness of men’s hearts” – conceded by Christ Himself – many unsaved men who otherwise would have been content merely to divorce their unfaithful wives would now be forced to stone them if their hard hearts would not permit them to forgive the unrepentant woman.

5. **BY DEFINITION “FORNICATION” (Greek - *porneia*) = “BETROTHAL INFIDELITY”**

If true, this would be perhaps the strongest argument in favor of the betrothal view since, by definition, Christ would be introducing an exception for betrothal infidelity into the statement.

BUT – the Bible does not restrict the meaning of this term solely to the meaning of “betrothal infidelity.” Nor is it a word with multiple specific definitions; rather, it is a broad term with a single generic definition: “sexual immorality.” This term is broad enough to encompass a variety of expressions of immorality, such as pre-marital unchastity, betrothal infidelity, marital infidelity, incest, etc. In such passages as Ezk. 16:32-34, Amos 7:17, and Rev. 2:20-22 the term is clearly synonymous with “adultery.” There can be no question that the women of Ezk. 16 and Amos 7 are “married” (not merely betrothed), yet in the Greek translation of the OT (LXX) their sin is called “porneia.” Furthermore, in 1 Cor. 5:1, the term “porneia” clearly refers to the sin of incest – not betrothal infidelity.

Arguments Against:

1. **VIOLATES THE CONTEXT**

Apart from the disputed exception clause, there can be no question that not once do Christ, the Pharisees, or the disciples refer to betrothal throughout the entire narratives (Matt. 5:27-32 & Matt.

19:1-9). There is, of course, different Greek terminology for distinguishing between marriage (*gameo*) and betrothal (*mnesteuo*), and Matthew is not averse to using the proper Greek vocabulary to distinguish between the two. In Matt. 1:18 he uses the terminology for betrothal, whereas in Matt. 5:32 & 19:9-10 he uses the terminology for marriage (4x). Likewise, the two key OT texts debated by Christ and the Pharisees (Gen. 2:24, Deut. 24:1-4) have absolutely nothing to do with betrothal, but rather are restricted entirely to the issue of marriage. To introduce betrothal into the discussion, therefore, entirely violates the context. Perhaps one might argue that – even though neither the Pharisees nor the disciples ever mention betrothal – they surely must have been thinking about it, so Christ anticipates their thoughts and addresses the issue anyway. But, to base an entire interpretation upon a *supposition* of what they might have been thinking is presumptuous and amounts to reading into the text what is not plainly there (eisegesis) as opposed to reading out of the text what *is* plainly there (exegesis).

2. VIOLATES LOGIC

Betrothal is very similar to marriage; indeed, betrothed couples were considered “married” – only without the consummation. Furthermore, the Law of Moses provides the same remedy for both betrothal infidelity and marital infidelity. Based upon the similarity of the two institutions and the Mosaic legislation regulating them, we derive the following syllogism (two premises and a logical conclusion):

- A. Major Premise: The Bible allows the same remedy for both betrothal infidelity and marital infidelity (Deut. 22:21-22)
- B. Minor Premise: The Bible allows divorce as a remedy for betrothal infidelity (Matt. 1:18-19)
- C. Conclusion: Therefore, the Bible allows divorce as a remedy for marital infidelity (hence, Matt. 19:9).

3. VIOLATES VOCABULARY CHOICE OF JESUS: HE SPEAKS OF “ADULTERY”

Apart from consideration of the exception clause itself, the only sin of which Jesus speaks in both Matt. 5:27-32 and Matt. 19:1-9 is “adultery.” Christ specifically and repeatedly addresses the issue of when one is guilty of marital infidelity. He says that one who divorces & remarries apart from the exception is guilty of adultery. But if Christ envisions the possibility of a betrothed man dissolving his betrothal and marrying someone else, how could he be guilty of violating marriage vows (adultery) and making the woman violate marriage vows (adultery) since neither of them has ever been married? They have never said marriage vows, so they *could* be guilty of “betrothal infidelity” (fornication?), but how would they be guilty of “marital infidelity” (adultery)?

This is an important point – especially since the betrothal interpretation is built entirely upon the idea that Christ carefully & deliberately distinguishes between “fornication” (betrothal infidelity) and “adultery” (marital infidelity) – with no overlap between the two terms. Thus, having argued that Jesus so carefully distinguishes between “betrothal infidelity” and “marital infidelity” by restricting divorce to “betrothal infidelity,” they are then left with Jesus *confounding the two sins* by accusing a

betrothed couple of “marital infidelity” (adultery). (I agree that Christ is not using the terms synonymously: “fornication” is broad and generic; “adultery” is very specific. The specific term, however, is encompassed in the broad one.) Thus, the betrothal interpretation makes Christ guilty of doublespeak.

BETROTHAL vs. MARRIAGE: WHICH MAKES THE “EXCEPTION CLAUSE” MORE CLEAR?

The “betrothal view” claims that Matthew includes the exception clause as a clarification that exonerates Joseph for seeking to dissolve his betrothal to Mary. But, does the betrothal interpretation add clarity or ambiguity?

Betrothal: Clear

If Christ intended to introduce betrothal into the discussion, then He would have been much more clear *if* He had said something like the following:

“Whoever divorces his woman (except for betrothal infidelity) and marries another woman commits either betrothal infidelity or marital infidelity.”

[i.e. commits either fornication or adultery]

Betrothal: Ambiguous

If Christ intended to introduce betrothal into the discussion, then He introduced much ambiguity into the discussion by wording it as He actually *did*, which is as follows:

“Whoever divorces his woman (except for betrothal infidelity) and marries another woman commits marital infidelity.”

[this raises the question: how could a man who has never been married (only betrothed) be guilty of violating marriage vows?]

Marriage: Clear

If Christ were speaking solely about marriage, then He could not have been more clear by saying anything else than what He actually *did* say, which is as follows:

“Whoever divorces his wife (except for sexual immorality) and marries another woman commits marital infidelity.”

Conclusion: The far left translation is hypothetical, but very clear. The middle translation (the interpretation of the betrothal advocates) is actual, but very ambiguous since it raises the question of how a man who has never been married can commit adultery. The far right translation is both actual and very clear; it is, therefore, the preferred interpretation.

**The Jewish Audience of Matthew vs. the Roman Audience of Mark:
The Differences Between Matt. 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12**

I. ASSUMED FAMILIARITY WITH THE CREATION ACCOUNT

A. The differences:

| <i>Matthew</i> | <i>Mark</i> |
|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Have ye not read? | 1. ----- |
| 2. He who made | 2. God made |
| 3. The beginning | 3. The beginning of creation |
| 4. And said | 4. ----- |

B. The significance of the differences

Matthew assumes His Jewish audience had read the Genesis account of creation. He does not need to define God as the Creator, nor does he need to define creation as the beginning because his Jewish audience knew such things. Mark, on the other hand, assumes no such familiarity with Genesis on the part of his Roman audience, so he simply recounts the creation story directly, defining God as the Creator and creation as the beginning.

II. THE STATUS OF THE WOMAN: ACTIVE OR PASSIVE

A. The difference:

| <i>Matthew</i> | <i>Mark</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Passive: divorced & remarried | Active: divorces & remarries |

B. The significance of the difference:

In Jewish culture, a man could easily divorce his wife, but a woman could not so readily divorce her husband (she was more like a piece of property to be passed from one man to another). Matthew reflects this Jewish cultural reality by portraying the woman as passive – as acted upon by other men. In Roman culture, however, a woman could just as easily divorce her husband as he could divorce her. So, Mark portrays the woman as active – as making her own choices in life by actively seeking a divorce or choosing a remarriage.

III. REVERSAL OF EMPHASIS

A. The differences:

| <i>Matthew</i> | <i>Mark</i> |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Jesus: what Moses permitted | 1. Jesus: what Moses commanded |
| 2. Pharisees: what Moses commanded | 2. Pharisees: what Moses permitted |

B. The Significance of the differences:

In Matthew, Christ emphasizes that Moses' permission was merely a concession, and He restricts that concession to the grounds of sexual immorality – for both the divorce and subsequent remarriage. In so doing, Christ responds to the Hillel-Shammai question by asserting that neither rabbi is correct; that is, He raises the standard even higher than the conservative School of Shammai because (1) He presents divorce as an option – not a moral obligation, and (2) He restricts remarriage to the same grounds. In Mark, on the other hand, Christ emphasizes what Moses commanded (not permitted), and of course Moses never commanded divorce for any reason (not even for fornication). By framing the issue this way, Mark avoids the entire Hillel-Shammai debate, and this he does precisely because this old Jewish rabbinic debate would be of no interest to his Roman audience.

IV. REVERSAL OF SEQUENCE

A. The differences:

| <i>Matthew</i> | <i>Mark</i> |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Creation account | 1. Mosaic concession |
| 2. Mosaic concession | 2. Creation account |
| 3. Exception clause | 3. ----- |

B. The significance of the differences:

In Matthew, Christ progresses chronologically by first stressing the ideal for marriage defined in the Genesis account of creation, and then moving forward to acknowledge the later concession of Moses in Deuteronomy. In the immediate context of Deuteronomy, Christ inserts an exception that limits that concession to the grounds of sexual immorality. This progression is mandated by the Pharisee's insistence that Jesus solve the Hillel-Shammai debate by explaining the concession. In Mark, Christ first acknowledges the concession of Moses in Deuteronomy, and then quickly dispenses it by moving backward to the creation account where the ideal for marriage is held forth. In the immediate context of the Genesis ideal for marriage, inserting an exception would be out of place. Again, by utilizing this sequence, Mark climaxes Christ's discussion with the Pharisees void of any reference to the Hillel-Shammai debate (which would have been implied by introducing the exception, but which would have been irrelevant to his Roman audience).

V. DIALOGUE WITH THE PHARISEES: EXTENDED QUESTION & ANSWER

A. The differences:

Matthew

1. Question: Divorce okay “for every cause”?
2. Answer: No remarriage subsequent to a divorce, but with an exception

Mark

1. Question: divorce okay?
2. Answer: -----

B. The significance of the differences:

The phrase “for every cause” (which Mark omits) comes from the tradition of Hillel, and thus Matthew uses it to portray the Pharisees as raising the debate between Hillel & Shammai and asking Christ to side with one or the other. Correspondingly, Matthew provides an extended answer to the Pharisees’ question - an answer that includes an exception clause, but which raises the standard for divorce & remarriage higher than either Hillel or Shammai held. By framing the issue in terms of the Hillel-Shammai debate, Matthew addresses an issue of concern to the average Jew. Mark, on the other hand, side-steps the Hillel-Shammai issue by carefully omitting the phrase “for every cause” and correspondingly omitting Christ’s entire response about divorce & remarriage (i.e. omitting the equivalent of Matt. 19:9), precisely because this response included an exception that answers the Pharisees’ question about “for every cause.” Again, the Roman audience of Mark didn’t care about the rabbinic debate.

VI. DIALOGUE WITH THE DISCIPLES: CELIBACY vs. DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE

A. The differences:

Matthew

1. Disciples: statement – “good not to marry”
2. Christ: a lifetime of marriage is easier than a lifetime of celibacy

Mark

1. Disciples: question – not provided
2. Christ: prohibits remarriage subsequent to a divorce

B. The significance of the differences:

Matthew finishes his narrative by emphasizing the ideal for marriage (permanence), which is the general thrust of Christ’s teaching in both accounts. Here, Christ teaches the disciples that remaining married for a lifetime is not the difficult thing; rather, remaining celibate is. Correspondingly, it would be easier to remain married for a lifetime than to get divorced and then remain unmarried subsequent to that divorce. Mark records that the disciples continue to press the issue, but he does not provide the exact wording of their question (by contrast, we know precisely what question the Pharisees had asked Him). Having already acknowledged the concession in His earlier conversation with the Pharisees, Christ here reinforces the general rule for His disciples. They appear to be surprised – not that Christ restricts divorce to the grounds of fornication (Shammai had done the same) – but that Christ also restricts remarriage to the same grounds. Both

Jews and Romans took it as a given that remarriage was allowed after a divorce, and thus both Gospel writers conclude the narrative with a strong emphasis upon permanence. Mark's record of Christ's final response to the disciples prohibiting divorce & remarriage is, however, more strong and definitive than Matthew's record of Christ's final comments about marriage being easier than celibacy. Since Mark had not recorded Christ's earlier definitive response to the Pharisees (i.e. the equivalent of Matt. 19:9), it was necessary that he here include Christ's definitive response to the disciples for his audience.

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