

DIVORCE AND VIOLENCE: SYNONYMOUS PARALLELISM  
IN MALACHI 2:16  
by Elaine A. Heath\*

Is the Bible silent about divorce in the case of domestic violence? Christian commentators traditionally have argued that the Bible forbids all divorce or only permits it in the case of sexual infidelity. Yet I believe that the Old Testament verse most often cited to unilaterally forbid divorce, Malachi 2:16, actually champions hope and justice for victims of domestic violence. When read in its original historic and literary contexts and in light of the overarching biblical message of redemption, Malachi 2:16 presents domestic violence as a form of covenant-breaking equal to divorce. Moreover, this text asserts what abuse survivors know too well--that abuse *divorces* them from their abusive spouse. Abuse of all kinds<sup>1</sup> is an ongoing abandonment and betrayal by the abusive partner. What the church needs to hear and to tell those who are broken by domestic violence, is that *God hates domestic violence as much as he hates divorce*. Furthermore, when wounded Christians face a choice between divorce or continued victimization at the hands of an unrepentant, violent spouse, they need to know that God is their helper in the painful, life-saving process of ending the marriage. God's judgment rests against the oppressor and on behalf of the oppressed in such a case.

What, then, are we to make of the usual interpretations given to Malachi 2:16 from the average pulpit or book on Christian marriage? The major culprits are interpretive bias and lack of scholarship.

Historical and Literary Contexts

The isolated use of Malachi 2:16 to forbid, encourage, or merely permit divorce (three primary scholarly interpretations of this text)<sup>2</sup> is problematic at best, for the pericope as a whole (2:10-16) is fraught with textual, grammatical, and syntactical difficulties in Hebrew. Even when using the best critical tools, scholars disagree sharply as to Malachi's intent. Joyce Baldwin, for example, cites the text as being unequivocally against divorce.<sup>3</sup> F.F. Hvidberg dismisses verses 15-16 as "being completely unintelligible."<sup>4</sup> Gordon Paul Hugenberger sees the prohibition as being only against divorce motivated by aversion.<sup>5</sup> Then there are some who view the whole passage figuratively, saying it has nothing to do with literal marriage but with post-exilic syncretism.<sup>6</sup> What I seek to demonstrate is that despite its ambiguities this text is intelligible and that it has an important message for the church

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today, one which has not been heard from many pulpits. With that let us turn to the historic and literary contexts of Malachi, then we shall consider v. 16 in detail.

### Historical Context

Malachi, whose name simply means "my messenger," is believed to have lived in post-exilic Jerusalem around the same time as Ezra-Nehemiah, between 468-433 B.C. Nothing is known about Malachi, although Jewish tradition has it that he was from Sopha (an unknown location) and that from childhood onward he was an attractive, blameless fellow whose prophetic words were repeated by an affirming angel.<sup>7</sup>

Having returned from Babylon the Hebrews found their homeland in ruins. Eager to rebuild and to secure their holdings many Jews intermarried with indigenous pagan women (2:11). As Efrid points out, "this was a very pragmatic course of action because these families would have connections and resources so as to aid the Jewish community in its struggle for survival."<sup>8</sup> In so doing they introduced syncretism into Jewish worship, bringing upon themselves the judgment of Yahweh. "God expected them to honor and fear him as a suzerain party to a covenant is feared and honored (1:6-2:9)."<sup>9</sup> At the time Malachi writes the people are trapped in a morass of priestly corruption, oppressive labor practices, economic and social injustices that feed poverty, marital breakdown, violence, and widespread sexual immorality (3:5). These conditions have come about because the people, led by errant priests, have broken the Deuteronomic covenant.<sup>10</sup>

### Literary Context

Covenant is the primary literary theme in Malachi. Of the 55 verses in Malachi, 47 record God speaking to Israel directly concerning covenant issues. God is the initiator of the covenant and is the key figure in Malachi. By breaking the covenant the priests and those who follow them have made faith hard for everyone:

The atrophy of human love in the community (2:13-16) has undermined confidence in the divine love, and there is no appreciation of the providential overruling of God which has made possible the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple.<sup>11</sup>

Malachi is written as a series of six disputations between the prophet and Yahweh, preceded by a superscription and concluding with two appendices. The short sentences and direct style give credence to the text as the actual spoken words of Malachi rather than a heavily edited written version.<sup>12</sup> Malachi 2:16 is

part of the third disputation concerning marital faithlessness, both figurative (2:11) and literal (2:14-16). The violence done to Israel's spirituality by her infidelity to Yahweh is mirrored in the marital infidelity and violence prevalent in the land. Malachi is written exclusively to the people of God, calling them to repentance and the blessings that will follow.

## 2:16 Translation with Grammatical and Syntactical Issues

From the first phrase (*kî s̄anē shallah*) this verse poses multiple challenges for translators. Both the initial particle and the subject of the verb are ambiguous. Let us begin with a rather wooden translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Text: "For he hates one who puts away [or 'you' who put away]" says Yahweh the God of Israel, "and one who covers his garment with violence" says Yahweh of the hosts. "So watch yourselves in your spirit and do not act treacherously."

In this case I have translated *kî* as a causal subordinating conjunction,<sup>13</sup> as have the translators of the NRSV. The NIV implies such a rendering but leaves the particle untranslated. It is important to note, however, that *kî* may also be read as a conditional particle,<sup>14</sup> in which case the subject of 'he hates' is the divorcing man rather than Yahweh: "If one hates and divorces, says Yahweh, God of Israel, he covers his garment with violence, says Yahweh of hosts."<sup>15</sup> This rendering is upheld by the Septuagint, Vulgate, Targum, Talmud, and 4QX11\*, as well as the NEB.<sup>16</sup> Known as the "traditional Jewish interpretation," this reading encourages divorce when the divorcing man hates his wife.<sup>17</sup> I have chosen to translate the particle as a causal subordinating conjunction because the sense of the immediate passage as well as Malachi's message as a whole support the idea of Yahweh's judgment against covenant-breaking.

There is also the difficulty of the awkward grammatical construction of *s̄anē*, which is a Qal participle third masculine singular--"he" or "one." Who is acting--Yahweh or the divorcing man? The meaning of the passage is entirely different depending on who is the subject. Hugenberger, among others, argues that the usual rendering "I hate" requires excessive emendation, therefore translations such as the NRSV are in error.<sup>18</sup> Smith, however, defines the correct reading as *s̄an'ty* 'I hated', in keeping with Baldwin and several others.<sup>19</sup> While Hugenberger's thesis is attractive and well-reasoned, I am inclined to accept Yahweh as the subject since Yahweh is the one who is bringing judgment against Israel for her infidelities. He is the subject of the verb in several other instances.<sup>20</sup>

A third, less critical ambiguity exists in the verb *shallah* which may be parsed either as a Piel second masculine singular imperative, Piel infinitive construct, or Piel infinitive absolute, though the latter is the only form making grammatical sense in the context.

## Word Study and Literary Devices

With Yahweh saying "I hate divorcing" then, let us turn to the second half of the sentence that is rarely ever mentioned from pulpits or in books on Christian marriage: "...and one who covers his garment with violence." First we will consider the options in meaning for the first part of the clause, then take a closer look at 'violence' (hms). Finally we will consider the possibility that this phrase is an example of synonymous parallelism, a favorite Hebraic literary device, one which profoundly influences the meaning of Yahweh's indictment.

The idea of a garment being covered with violence is repeated in the final verb of v.16, 'be faithless' (NRSV; 'break faith', NIV). Taken from the root bgd ('garment'), this word became a euphemism for "acts that were improper within the setting of a community composed of equal partners in covenant with God. Cheating, swindling the gullible, defrauding the poor or helpless members of society, etc.--all were called *begeding*."<sup>21</sup> It is a key word in this pericope, occurring five times (2:10,11,14,15,16), underscoring the faithlessness and treachery of the people. Note that bgd also ties in with hamas, "violence," so that the concept of being a violent, treacherous spouse is stated with three words in v.16: divorce, violence, and "*begeding*."

The meaning of "covering his garment with violence" has generated much debate in scholarly circles. There are three basic approaches to interpretation. First there is the idea proposed by those who interpret the entire passage metaphorically, who see it as a reference to the temple cultus, with priests splashing sacrificial blood on their clothing yet being unworthy supplicants because of their faithless lives.<sup>22</sup>

The older, more traditional view is that this is "simply another instance of the pervasive biblical image of clothes as the outward expression of the inner state of a man" (Ps.73:6; Is. 59:6).<sup>23</sup>

Finally there is the most well-accepted modern proposition, reflected in a footnote of the NIV, that the term refers to the wife. This interpretation is based primarily on the Hebrew custom of a man placing his garment over a woman as part of the marriage rite (Deut 22:30; Ruth 3:9; Ezek 16:80). This is also the interpretation that I propose, so that the first sentence of v.16 should read: " 'For I hate the one who divorces' says Yahweh the God of Israel, 'and the one who covers his wife with violence' says Yahweh of the hosts."

The word for violence, hamas, appears 58 times in the OT. In ten of the usages the word means verbal violence through slander, false testimony, false accusations and blaming, deceitful speech, and abusive language (Deut 19:16; Ps 27:12, 140:11; Prov 10:11). Twelve times the word refers to institutionalized violence in the forms of unjust government, oppressive labor practices, and household strife (Jer 51:35, 46; Ezek 7:11; Hab 1:9; 2:8; Zeph 1:9). In at least three cases

violence is some form of economic exploitation (Ezek 28:16; Amos 3:10; Hab 2:8). Habakkuk 2:8 is a litany against the violence which destroys people groups, murders, damages the earth, and ruins cities. The remaining OT usages of hamas signify physical brutality or generally destructive behavior or people (the violent). When God sent the flood (Gen 6:11, 13) it was because the earth was filled with hamas. God hates violence. God's judgment falls against the violent.

In light of all this evidence, then, we may justifiably posit that Malachi 2:16 links divorce with domestic violence ("one who covers his wife with violence"). This verse is an example of synonymous parallelism, a pervasive Semitic literary device in which one idea is expressed in two ways for emphatic purposes.<sup>24</sup> In this verse we see divorce and a man covering his wife with violence as synonymous. God hates both. God's judgment is against the violent spouse.

### Malachi 2:16, Deuteronomy, and Ezra

Those who attempt to use Malachi 2:16 to forbid divorce unilaterally need to reconsider their position in light of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Ezra 9-10, one of which assumes divorce and permits it, the other being a command from Yahweh for Hebrew men to divorce their pagan wives (a command, not insignificantly, which came at about the same time and place as Malachi's prophecy). If God is unequivocally opposed to divorce, how are we to reconcile these verses?

The first passage neither condemns nor endorses divorce--it simply assumes that divorce happens. The prohibition of Deut. 24:1-4 is against a woman remarrying her first husband after having been married to a second husband who either dies or divorces her "because he dislikes her." While it is unclear from the immediate text exactly why the remarriage to the first husband is an abomination to God, there is good reason to believe that God is protecting the woman through this law. Hugenberger argues convincingly that the casuistic law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was actually a prevention of economic exploitation of the woman since she would come out of the second marriage with a financial settlement because of the motive for the divorce (dislike), or she would have the inheritance of the second husband if he died. In that case remarriage to the first husband would allow him to hurt the woman twice--first by rejecting her and keeping her dowry (since his motive for divorce was "indecent," which permitted him to keep her dowry), and second by taking control of the economic resources she gained from her second marriage.<sup>25</sup> Hugenberger goes on to say that "the implied financial penalty on the second husband who divorces in Deut. 24:3 in reality reflects a disapprobation of divorce when grounded in mere aversion similar to what is attested in Mal. 2:16."<sup>26</sup>

Evangelical sociologist and feminist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen provides a fresh perspective on OT law which is very apt in relation to Mal. 2:16 and God's condemnation of the husband who divorces his wife wrongfully or who

covers his wife with violence:

Contemporary feminists are right to be critical of theorists and theologians who exempt domestic life from the requirements of justice...However, taken as a whole the laws of the Old Testament existed less to protect the privileges of the strong than to guarantee justice for the weak, among whom women and children (and especially widows and orphans) are regularly included.<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusion

Yahweh's message to Israel through Malachi is powerfully applicable to the church today. To break a covenant is to commit violence. In the context of verses 10-16 as well as Deuteronomy 24:1-4 divorce motivated by greed (economic and otherwise) is a form of violence and is reprehensible to God. Domestic violence in all its forms--physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual--is a lifestyle of covenant-breaking, of infidelity in what should be the most sacred of human relationships.

Richard Foster writes with a prophetic and compassionate voice to a church that for too long has at best ignored and at worst perpetrated domestic violence with its inadequate exegesis of Malachi 2:16:

But we live in a fallen world, and there are times when, despite all our efforts, the marriage enters the valley of the shadow of death. Every resource has been used. Every possible way to bring healing and wholeness has been tried. Still the marriage is immersed in destruction and bitterness. When such is the case, the law of love (agape) dictates that there should be a divorce...When it is clear that the continuation of the marriage is substantially more destructive than a divorce, then the marriage should end.<sup>28</sup>

God does hate divorce because divorce is the death of a relationship, the death of what should be the source of life and joy and freedom. Yet God hates violence even more than divorce, for violence kills both the relationship and the individuals. When faced with the choice of remaining in an abusive marriage out of fear of God's judgment, or of ending the marriage in order to end the abuse, Christians need to be assured that God is on the side of the oppressed. God's strength, healing, and love are promised to all who turn to him for refuge. Malachi 2:16 is more than a condemnation of marital infidelity. It is a message of consolation for those coming out of the bondage of domestic violence. God is on the side of the oppressed.

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>When speaking of abuse and domestic violence I am referring to all forms of abuse--physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and spiritual. While most contemporary literature dealing with domestic violence (battering) in the church limits the discussion primarily to physical abuse, the reality is that some of the most damaging abuse is emotional. Verbal assault through ridicule and threatening language, manipulation through emotional distancing, unmerited accusations, jealousy, and suspicion, and other forms of emotional abuse are devastating. Sexual abuse in the form of marital rape and other practices must be acknowledged for the soul-destroying violence that it is. Nor can we ignore the degrading effects of economic abuse where the controlling spouse uses economic oppression to control and dehumanize his or her partner and children. As we shall see in the discussion of hms 'violence', the Hebraic view of violence (and of covenant and fidelity) is profoundly holistic, incorporating all aspects of life.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon Paul Hugenberger, Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed from the Perspective of Malachi, VTS 52 (Brill: Leiden, 1994), 51.

<sup>3</sup>Joyce Baldwin, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi (London/Downers Grove: Inter Varsity, 1972), 241.

<sup>4</sup>Hugenberger, 52.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph L. Smith, Micah-Malachi (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 325.

<sup>7</sup>Smith, 297.

<sup>8</sup>James M. Efrid, Marriage and Divorce (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 41.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 300.

<sup>10</sup>Deuteronomy 28-29.

<sup>11</sup>Baldwin, 221-2.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 213-14.

<sup>13</sup>Ronald J. Williams, Hebrew Syntax: An Outline (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1976), 72.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Hugenberger, 67. This translation is Hugenberger's, whose approach to the text is that it is an apodosis, forming the basis for his argument that the passage prohibits only divorce motivated by aversion.

<sup>16</sup>Hugenberger, 57-8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid, 70..

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Smith, 320.

<sup>20</sup>Deut 12:31 (abomination), 16:22 (idols); Isa 61:8 (robbery and iniquity); Prov 6:16 (six/seven evil things).

<sup>21</sup>Smith, 321.

<sup>22</sup>Hugenberger, 74.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>W. Randolph Tate, Biblical Interpretation (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 98.

<sup>25</sup>Hugenberger, 79-80.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>27</sup>Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, ed., After Eden: Facing the Challenge of Gender Reconciliation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 427.

<sup>28</sup>Richard J. Foster, Money, Sex, and Power (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 145.