



Exegetical analysis of Malachi 2:16 as a new normal in solving the problem of divorce among Christians in Nigeria

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Abstract

The rate of divorce in Nigeria, especially among Christians is on the increase, and this has negatively affects the church and the society. Although, much has been done to address the problem, but apparently success has been minimal. Thus the researcher sees it as a result of inadequate interpretation of Malachi 2:16. The text is perhaps the most commonly quoted passage by interpreters to support divorce, possibly because many of the English versions make it a direct condemnation from God and interpreters rarely consider other English versions that read differently and most especially the Masoretic Text. God says, "The man who hates and divorces his wife, does violence to the one he should protect." This decree is a direct warning to the man who hates and divorces his wife and to reprimand or reproof unfaithful spouses. This paper aimed to examine the exegetical analysis of Mal 2:16 as a new normal in solving the problem of divorce among Christians in Nigeria. This will alley the fear of the youths into marring the right person. And also encourage couples to avoid divorce, and develop God's perspective on marriage and cultivate good relationship with their spouse. Methodology employed for this study is the analytical and exegetical methods, the paper examines the intent of Mal 2:16. Its employs the analytical approach in studying the citation of Malachi 2:16, while it exploits the exegetical method for the study of Mal 2:10-16 with a view to ascertaining the intent of verse 16.





The paper recommends that commitment to personal holiness and a steadfast fidelity to one spouse is needed in holy matrimony. If we believe that the Bible is the word of God; if we believe that it is sufficient, necessary, clear and authoritative; then we must go to the text itself and let it speak for itself. And lastly, for better understanding to reducing divorce among Christians in Nigeria, appreciating and working knowledge of the biblical languages is a prerequisite for the preachers.

Keywords: Exegetical, Analysis, Divorce, New Normal, and Christians

Introduction

The rate of divorce in Nigeria, especially among Christians is on the increase, and this has negatively affects the church and the society as a whole. Although, much has been done to address the problem, but apparently success has been minimal. Thus the researcher sees it as a result of inadequate interpretation of Malachi 2:16. The text is perhaps the most commonly quoted passage by some interpreters to support divorce, possibly because many of the English versions make it a direct condemnation from God and interpreters rarely consider other English versions that read differently and most especially the Masoretic Text. "The Lord, the God of Israel says; for the man who hates and put away or divorces his wife, does violence to the one he should protect." The question here is; is divorce injunction a command in this context or a volitional injunction i.e. power to make your own choices or decisions? And according to the passage who should hates divorce?

On this premises this paper aimed to examine Mal 2:16 as a new normal in solving the problem of divorce among Christians in Nigeria. This work will alley the fear of the youth into marring the right person. And also encourage couples to avoid divorce, and develop God's perspective on marriage and cultivate good relationship with their spouses. To achieve these, the paper first examines the overview of divorce among Christians in Nigeria, the Concept of Divorce, and most importantly the paper examines the exegetical analysis of Mal. 2:16 in solving the problem of divorce among Christians in Nigeria. And lastly, the paper was concluded with reasonable and relevant applications and recommendations.

A. Concept of Divorce

Divorce is the legal or religious dissolution of marriage by the members of a couple or violation of any of the rights or obligations of marriage.



The dictionary meaning of divorce is the termination of marriage, separation or end of marriage. The termination of marriage is usually granted by a court of law. Hence, in a concise manner, divorce means legal dissolution of marriage. (Shields, 2004). While separation as a form of divorce is a step towards resolving differences or termination of marriage. In other words, separation often results in resolution of conflict or dissolution depending on its outcome. (Olumyiwa, 2019).

B. Overview of Divorce among Christians in Nigeria

In Nigeria, abandonment or separation can lead to divorce and this can happen in various stages of relationship, such as; emotional divorce, selfishness, fake doctrine or belief, and unfaithfulness. These can be examined in the following stages:

In a reported case, "the husband forced his wife out of the matrimonial home, and abandoned her for three years without any maintenance." (Andreas, 1996), this is as a result of emotional heartbreak. This may occur in the form of a husband isolating his wife completely even when they still live together in the same house. In such a case the husband "cooks his own food, sleeps in a separate room, denies his wife sex and fails to communicate with her." (Hightower, 2017)

Another form of marriage abandonment or separation happens when a man deliberately moves out of the matrimonial home without the consent of his wife, leaving her and the children to their own fate. There are cases where a "husband travels out of the country, in search of greener pastures, and never comes back to his wife(family) or gets married with another woman. This is the present reality of lots of married people in Nigeria." (Hightower, 2017)

Another type of wife absconding or separation in Nigeria has to do with men entering into extra-marital love affairs. They begin to come home late or spending some nights out of the matrimonial home. In such a home the wife and the children become destitute if the husband is the sole bread winner of the family. This behaviour is symptomatic to so-called 'sugar daddies' who are well known in Nigeria. The term is used to describe elderly men who enter into illicit love affairs with young girls of the age of their own children, thereby abandoning their wives and families.

Wife abandonment or separation may, therefore, not necessarily involve official divorce, but the women who are thus maltreated fare little better than being divorced. Sometimes an abandoned wife may not even know the whereabouts of her husband for months,



sometimes for years. Apart from the resulting insecurity in the home, the woman may also be saddled with the responsibility of looking for her husband. In some instances, instead of her in-laws being there to sympathise with the deserted woman, they threaten to do her the worst harm if their relative is not found. They may even blame her for the man's disappearance, sometimes accusing the woman of possibly using her husband for rituals. To this end, a deserted wife may face a lot of psychological suffering. Mal 2:16 condemns this act as treachery and violence against women whether it involves divorce or not (Hightower, 2017).

However, it is pertinent to note that sometimes a man's extra-marital affair is caused by his wife's misbehaviour. Some men may use this form of abuse as a response to women "who nag, disobey or want to take over the seat of authority from the man, who is always revered as the head of the house." Other attitudes of a woman that can push a man into extra-marital affair include denial of conjugal rights, laziness in performing her house duties, among others. These traits may induce the husband to begin to avoid his home, seeking peace elsewhere (Solomon, 2019).

It is important to note, however, that although Mal 2:16 focuses specifically on Jewish men who abandoned their native wives for non-native women. In Nigeria the message of the prophet is also applicable also to both the women and men who are treacherous towards their spouse. And this is what this work seek to proffer solution to.

C. Exegetical Analysis of Malachi 2:16

Brief Introduction to the Book of Malachi

The book of Malachi opens with "The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi" (1:1, RSV). Unlike in the other prophetic books, this superscription gives no information concerning the prophet's ancestry or place of birth; neither is he called a prophet. (Tremier, 2006). In view of the terseness of the introduction and the fact that the Hebrew מלאכי (Malachi) literally means 'my messenger,' some scholars contend that 'Malachi' is not a proper name but a pen name. The prophecy originally circulated as an addition to the book of Zechariah. (Christian, 2012). But there are others who hold that there was a prophetic individual named Malachi. (Gordon, 1994). Redditt opines that the book of Malachi in its present form is a redaction from two previously existing collections authored by a non-Zadokite Levite at the Jerusalem temple (Paul, 1994). However, scholars seem to be in agreement in fixing the date of Malachi to the post-exilic era (or the Persian period). Matthews, for example, places the book between 500



and 450 B. C. E. because it "reflects the activities of the priestly community immediately after the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple" in 515. (Matthews, 2012). In studying the theological purpose of Malachi scholars have identified six so-called disputations couched in a somehow unique format. In a disputation the prophet gives a charge to the accused, followed by "a hypothetical audience response, and an answer that leaves the accused with no further recourse." (Boloje, 2018). A good example is found in 2:17.

At the heart of these disputations stands the covenant, three of which are mentioned explicitly, namely, "the covenant with Levi (2:8), the covenant of the fathers, and the covenant of marriage (2:10-16)." (Tremmer, 2006). Hence, in the six disputations Hugenberger recognises Malachi's wake-up call to his fellow-Israelites, in their cynicism and religious malaise, "to renewed covenant fidelity." (Gordon, 1994). In the first of the disputations (1:2-5) the prophet defends the reality of God's elective love for Israel, which calls for their covenantal obedience and sincere worship. In the second one (1:6-2:9) Malachi identifies the ways in which the priests were dishonouring God, for which he castigates them.

In the opinion of Hugenberger in 2:10-16, the third disputation, the message concentrates on interfaith marriage between the Israelites and foreign women as unfaithfulness to Israel's covenant with Yahweh, as well as divorce as infidelity against covenanted marriages between husbands and wives. In the fourth of the disputations (2:17-3:5), the prophecy turns eschatological as the author foretells future vindication for the righteous which will take place when the messenger of the covenant comes to judge the wicked.

In 3:6-12, which is the fifth disputation, Malachi returns to the issue of the people sacrificing poor offerings to the Lord, for which reason they had experienced material adversity. In 3:13-4:3, the sixth disputation, the author assures the Israelites who thought that evildoers had escaped divine justice due to their prosperity, that they will yet be judged, while Yahweh will vindicate those who fear him. Chapter 4:4-6 seems to be a summary of the prophecy in which the audience is enjoined to "remember the law of Moses and the promise of Elijah and the coming day of the Lord." (Solomon, 2019). But this work focused on translation and interpretation of Mal 2:16.

Lexical, Syntactical and Expository Analysis of Malachi 2:16

The Masoretic Text reads רמא הוהי תואבצ אנשייכ חלש רמא הוהי יהלא לארשי הסכו סמה ושובלילע. The transliteration is; "For that he hates putting away says the Lord, the God of Israel, for one covers violence with his garment says the Lord of hosts." As it is, the text is in the perfect and it is usually

translated in the present, it would literally read, "For he that hates and putting away, says the Lord, the God of Israel, he covers violence upon his garment, says the of hosts."

The first problem is the question of the subject of the two main verbs, *אָנַח* (to hate) and *הִסֵּךְ* (to cover), both being in the 3rd person masculine singular. If Yahweh is the one who hates, is he the one who also "covers violence upon his garment"? Out of the twelve English versions consulted, nine out of them make Yahweh the subject of *אָנַח* and out of these nine, eight put verse 16a in the direct speech: "I hate divorce." These eight may have all converted to direct speech like KJV's, "For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away...." This may then explain the popular proclamation in sermons, that God hates divorce. However, the ESV makes "the man," not God, the subject of both *אָנַח* (to hate) and *הִסֵּךְ* (to cover), rendering the passage as, "For the man who hates and divorces covers his garment with violence." This is similar to the NIV "The man who hates and divorces his wife, does violence to the one he should protect." These two translations that is both the NIV and ESV are perfect translations for this work.

The second issue is the view of *אָנַח וְהִסֵּךְ הוּא* in the text, some have suggested a repointing of this phrase. Thus, the interpretive difficulty of Mal 2:16 lies in the correlation between the two clauses, *אָנַח וְהִסֵּךְ הוּא* (For he hates sending away) and *הִסֵּךְ סִמָּה וְשׂוֹבֵלִילֵעַ* (and he covers violence upon his garment). Since both clauses are in the third person masculine singular, as Zehnder plausibly suggests they should have the same subject. (Zehnder, 2003).

Therefore, the translation should be "For the man who hates and divorces covers his garment with violence." ESV. This is similar to the NIV's "The man who hates and divorces his wife, does violence to the one he should protect." Thus the traditional translation "For I hate divorce ..." according to KJV, loses sight of this fact and introduces a change of subject between the two halves of verse 16a as if God hate and covers His garment; but the two verbs *אָנַח* (to hate) and *הִסֵּךְ* (to cover) are not in direct contact with Yahweh but the man who hates his wife and put away or divorces his wife covers his garment with violence. However, the traditional translation of the passage "For I hate divorce..." make the verse seems to be unnecessary and cumbersome.

It is pertinent to point out that the interpretation of Mal. 2:16 being suggested here, particularly in Glazier-McDonald's view, "For one who divorces because of hatred, thereby covers his garment with violence", this is in agreement with Mal 2:10-16 that addresses the situation in which Jewish men were divorcing their native Jewish wives



in order to marry women of foreign faiths. In that case the protasis הלש אנשייב describes how these Jewish men behaved: "they 'hate' their Israelite wives because they appear to them as inferior, hence they expel" them. (Glazier-McDonald, 1987)

However, in this passage שובל is better understood "as a figurative expression of the person himself and his inner character;" in that case, the expression "and he covers violence upon his garment" may "be understood to refer to the stain which the sin of divorce leaves, like the blood of a victim on the garment of the murderer." This proposition may be buttressed by Zech. 3:4 where a soiled cloth indicates uncleanness of heart. In this way, if the protasis הלש אנשייב describes the behaviour of the Jewish men who divorced their wives out of hate to marry foreign women, then the apodosis הפכו סמה ושובלילע (and he covers violence upon his garment) further depicts divorce as "a severe wrong" from Yahweh's own evaluation. In other words, "the expulsion of their wives in order to marry another woman of foreign faith is a moral wrong in the eyes of Yahweh." (Zehnder, 2003)

And finally, according to the verb הלש (to put away) and the phrase הפכו סמה ושובלילע (and he covers violence upon his garment), הלש the word *shalah* is in verb piel construct and the word rendered piel connote intensity, by implication putting away one spouse is highly implicative, it is to go extreme against God's will. So also, the phrase "and he covers violence upon his garment" is a figurative description of all kinds of wrongdoing but here it is applied specifically to the men's act of putting their native wives away in order to marry foreign women. He who divorces for this reason covers his garment with violence, that is, "visibly defiles himself with violence." Because, as far as God is concern separation or divorce was never part of God's original design for mankind.

However, any man who hates and put away his wife, as far as Yahweh is concern, such a man does violence to the one he should protect. Because it is the duty of every man to protect his wife, as Yahweh protects him. But in case there is physical treat or danger that could lead to death then separation should be allowed for a while and haven't settle the problem they should come together in other to continue their relationship, but separation should not lead to divorce. Furthermore, if there is no physical treat or danger then separation and divorce should always be the exception and not the norms. Furthermore, it's important for every man to be faithful to his wife and be on his guard to avoid divorce for every reasons.



Implications of Separation or Divorce

The acts of separation or divorce can be highly implicative and leads to the following;

- i. **Going against God's will:** Putting away once spouse is highly implicative, it is to go extreme against God's will, and any man who hates and put away his wife, as far as Yahweh is concern, such a man does violence to the one he should protect.
- ii. **Grief:** divorce is a death of a union, and the death of a dream and anyone who involved in this will feel grief and loss during a divorce. If there are children involved, they will experience severe grief over the loss of being with both parents together, living under the same roof. They will feel a familial loss. Divorce also separates in-laws. Grief however, hits every part of a family during a divorce.
- iii. **Trauma:** divorce marks a pivotal moment in a person's life, especially for children; life as they know it changes forever and they become different versions of themselves, adapting to new routines and new versions of their parents (who have also changed). They might move to new house, new school, or be part of new step-family. Often, children take responsibility for their parents' divorce, internalizing guilt and regret over the break-up.
- iv. **Relationship with the Ex-Spouse:** Parents must still work together to solve problems concerning their children, which now involve a tug-of-war over time, money, influence, gifts, vacations among others.
- v. **Financial Stress:** Another implication is financial stress, the relocation and replacement of expenses after the household items are divided up, is a serious problem.
- vi. **Emotional Problem:** Following a divorce, parents and children often experience emotional problems that can last for years, even for the rest of their lives. Anxiety, depression, fear of abandonment, distrust, insecurity, lack of intimacy, confusion over sexuality, loneliness, bitterness, losing friends, singleness, rebellion, dividing of memories and belongings, all these and many more usually happens to the divorcee and the children involved.

D. Conclusion

This paper has no desire to heap guilt or condemnation on those who have already been traumatized by divorce. We cannot undo the past. But we can learn from our mistakes and grow as we walk in daily repentance. Therefore, this paper seeks not to add to anyone's pain. But to call us back to God's standard of lifelong marriage and give

some biblical principles that can help all of us avoid divorce. This problem affected both the priests and the people in Malachi's day. In our text, the prophet unfolds God's perspective on marriage and divorce and gives us some principles for cultivating our marriage relationships so that we cannot merely avoid divorce, but also have satisfying marriages that glorify God.

Jesus' teaching on divorce is also equally strong. The religious teachers asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" (Matthew 19:3). Jesus answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, '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" (Matthew 19:4-6; cf. Genesis 2:24). Jesus then noted that the Law had allowed divorce only because people had a "hardness of heart" and were bent on doing what they wanted anyway. Therefore, Divorce was never part of God's original design for mankind. (Matthew 19:8).

E. Recommendations

The paper recommends that:

- i. For better understanding to reducing divorce among Christians in Nigeria, appreciating and working knowledge of the biblical languages is a prerequisite for the interpreters.
- ii. Commitment to personal holiness and a steadfast fidelity to one spouse is needed in holy matrimony.
- iii. If we believe that the Bible is the word of God; if we believe that it is sufficient, necessary, clear and authoritative; then for better understanding, we must let the text speak for itself.
- iv. Christian Couples should know that marriage is a union that must be built on patience, endurance, tolerance and perseverance as its major ingredients.
- v. Christian Couples should also make sure that there is proper understanding of one and other before jumping into marriage.
- vi. Finally, marriage should transverse personal likes and be purely driven by the love of God and the understanding of the other as another self.

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