

Divorce in First-Century Judaism and the New Testament

First let me say what a pleasure it is to be here. It was here in Belfast that I started my interest in this topic. The C of I was debating remarriage of divorcees in church without much insight into the biblical material, so I decided one summer vacation to write a submission for their committee. This fundamentally altered my view and I have subsequently written a number of articles and contributed to books on the topic. More recently I have had several enquiries about David Instone-Brewer's books and articles, at least two from N Ireland. So I thought it might be apt revisiting Belfast to revisit the subject.

Brewer argues that Jesus did not take a very original line on divorce. That he moreorless agreed with the stricter party of the Pharisees, the Shammaites, who held that divorce with the right of remarriage was possible in the case of adultery, or failure to provide one's wife with food, clothing and marital intercourse. Jesus was only condemning the liberals of his day, the Hillelite Pharisees, who had recently declared that one could have a divorce for any cause. Such divorces, were according to Jesus, invalid and if one went on to remarry one committed adultery.

In this paper I want to review this proposal, and ask whether it stands up. It is extremely difficult to write a history of this issue, because though there are plenty of marriage contracts from the ancient world the number of texts that actually spell out the philosophy and practice of marriage is quite limited. So we shall need to start in the OT era and work forward to the NT. To understand the OT texts we need to supplement the biblical texts with evidence from the legal collections from surrounding cultures. To understand the NT texts we need to utilise texts from subsequent centuries, both Jewish, eg. Mishnah and Talmud, and Christian, the commentaries of the early Fathers.

It is generally agreed that marriage practice in the OT did not differ very much from the rest of the ancient Near East, and legal collections like the laws of Hammurabi or Eshnunna as well as marriage contracts give us a picture that applies to the OT as well. Marriages were usually arranged by the parents of the couple, partly because of their age, and partly because of the large sums of money and goods that changed hands. These transfers greatly stabilised marriage.

When a marriage was agreed, the groom or his family gave a large marriage present to the bride's family, typically 10 – 30 shekels, equivalent to several years' pay. Remember Jacob, without parental backing had to find the money himself, by working 7 years for each of his

wives. But this was not the only payment on marriage. The bride's father gave her on her wedding a large present of clothing, furniture, and cash. This was called the dowry. Leah and Rachel's dowries each included a slave girl.

Total fidelity was demanded of the wife in marriage. If she was caught with another man, both could be put to death. But note the husband was not so tightly bound: if he had an affair with a single woman, that was not adultery, though it could prove expensive. This double standard on adultery went along with a tolerance of polygamy but not polyandry.

Divorce would be another possibility, especially where the evidence was not clear cut. In this case the woman would forfeit her dowry and probably return in disgrace to her parental home. But in other situations divorce would cost the husband dear. If for example he divorced his wife because she was childless, he would have to give her the dowry and a divorce settlement equal to the marriage present (10 to 30 shekels). In cases of misbehaviour short of adultery no divorce settlement was payable but the woman still took her dowry with her. This in itself was a huge disincentive to divorce. A survey of Palestinian villagers in 1930s showed a very low divorce rate (< 5%), because although it is technically very easy to divorce under Islamic law, the divorced wife took the dowry with her. And that deterred most husbands from resorting to divorce.

These practices probably lie behind the only law on divorce in the OT. Deut. 24:1-4 (ESV)

"When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, [2] and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, [3] and the latter man hates her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies, who took her to be his wife, [4] then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

According to Raymond Westbrook there are two kinds of divorce here. The first case involves sexual misbehaviour, short of adultery, which entitles the first husband to divorce her and keep the dowry. She then remarries, bringing with her a second dowry. Her second husband then takes a dislike to her, 'hates' her, in other word has no justification for divorcing her. So if he divorces her, she keeps her dowry. The same

would be true if the second husband dies: she retains her dowry. The law's real point comes in verse 4. Her first husband, with his eye on the second dowry, cannot take her back. That we might say would add insult to injury. Having made a probably false accusation to obtain her first dowry and cast her out, he cannot pretend to exonerate her by taking her back, when his real motive is to acquire money from her.

So back in the time of Deuteronomy divorce was possible on grounds of immoral behaviour and also because the husband decided he did not like his wife. The same ground is mentioned in Malachi 2: 16 apparently. Hugenberger¹ translates it 'If one hates and divorces [that is, if one divorces merely on the ground of aversion].... he covers his garment with violence. Therefore, take heed to yourselves and do not be faithless [against your wife].'

Brewer argues that divorce for any cause was an innovation of first-century Hillelites. The evidence of the ancient Near East and the Old Testament on the other hand shows it was a very ancient practice. This is also the implication of the first-century Jewish writers Philo and Josephus: the latter says a man may divorce his wife 'for whatever cause'² Amram in *The Jewish Law of Divorce* says 'This ancient right of the husband, to divorce his wife at his pleasure, is the central thought in the entire system of Jewish divorce law.'³ Illustrations of this from the Hillelite school include 'He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him... R. Akiba says: Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written, "And it shall be if she find no favour in his eyes"'⁴

By the first century there had been some changes to the system of marriage and divorce payments, which may have made divorce easier. The initial marriage present was reduced to a token amount plus a promise to pay 200 dinars (a year's pay), if the wedding was cancelled or later her husband divorced his wife. This was a considerable deterrent to divorce, but quite a modest payment compared with the arrangements in the old Babylonian period. Furthermore this payment could be waived for fairly minor offences.

These are they that are put away without their ketubbah (divorce payment); a wife that transgresses the Law of Moses and Jewish custom.

¹ G. P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant*, (Brill, 1994) p. 76.

² Antiquities 4.8.23

³ D. W. Amram, *The Jewish Law of Divorce according to Bible and Talmud* (New York: Hermon Press, 1975), p. 24

⁴ *Gittin* 9: 10.

What conduct is such that transgresses the law of Moses? If she gives her husband untithed food or has connexion with him in her uncleanness, or does not set apart the dough-offering....And what conduct is such that transgresses Jewish custom? If she goes out with her hair unbound, or spins in the street, or speaks with any man.....Also if she is a scolding woman. And who is deemed a scolding woman? Whosoever speaks inside her house so that her neighbours hear her voice.’⁵

Of course in these cases the woman could still keep her dowry, which would constitute some deterrent to divorce. Nevertheless apart from financial considerations there were few constraints on a husband’s right to divorce. For women the situation was different; it was unusual in the Jewish world for a woman to be able initiate divorce proceedings.

In the first century though there were protests against this easygoing approach to divorce. The Essenes reproached the Pharisees for being seekers after smooth things, i. e. watering down the law’s demands. They argued on the basis of Gen 1: 27 that God intended monogamy, not polygamy. A view that did not become official Jewish teaching till the decree of Gershom in AD 1030.

Among the Pharisees there was a dispute between the party of Shammai and the Hillelites about grounds for divorce. Both parties appealed to Deuteronomy 24. On the basis of the phrase, ‘if then she finds no favor in his eyes’ Hillelites justified divorce for any reason. But Shammai insisted that ‘A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found unchastity in her’ Compare because he has found some indecency in her Deut 24: 1.’ This may be a fair interpretation of this particular clause, but it by no means proves that this was the only ground for divorce in Bible times. I would venture to suggest that it is more likely that the Shammaites were trying to innovate by excluding the right to a divorce for any cause, than that the Hillelites were trying to introduce this right.

But as far as the NT is concerned it does not matter who was innovating. All would agree that it was the dispute between the Shammaites and Hillelites that Jesus was being asked to adjudicate.

So much for the background to Jesus’ teaching. I want now to examine the texts more carefully, for what is most obviously lacking in Brewer’s work is a coherent exegesis of the key passages. They are all discussed piecemeal with lots of comments thrown in about Jewish beliefs and

⁵ *Ketuboth* 7: 6.

practices, but there is never a systematic discussion of the gospel texts. But first let me give a brief overview of why I think his views are wrong, before looking more carefully at Matthew 5 and 19.

The keystone of Brewer's view is that if a man divorced his wife, she was free to remarry and so could he. The key statement in Jewish divorce proceedings was 'You are free to marry any man'. Every Jew would therefore assume that divorce entitled you to remarry. This all scholars would agree with: Brewer is saying nothing new here. He then goes on to argue, or more accurately to assume, that Jesus and Paul thought the same. If someone was legitimately divorced, they were entitled to remarry. So his article tries to discover which grounds for divorce Jesus and Paul regarded as legitimate: adultery, neglect, and abandonment are Brewer's main grounds.

But debating about what reasons justify divorce misses the point of Jesus' teaching. For basically he never approves divorce, only separation, that is divorce without the right to remarry. He says in Luke 16: 18 - "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery."

Jews of Jesus' day supposed that when they said the divorce words 'You are free to marry any man', they really were free. But Jesus says that if they do marry again, they are committing adultery. This implies that the divorce ceremony does not really work: the original couple are still bound to each other in marriage. So to take a second partner is to commit adultery against the first. Brewer admits this, but he claims what Jesus really meant is 'A man who invalidly divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.' Wherever Jesus says divorce and marry Brewer rewrites it and says invalidly divorce and marry. Talk of assuming what you need to prove!

To return to Jesus. The same logic is clear in Mark, where Jesus not only reasserts that to divorce and remarry is adulterous, but why he thinks this. It is because God intended marriage to be life-long. "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (Mark 10:6-9) God's original purpose disclosed in Genesis was thus life-long monogamy. Note that he only provided one Eve for Adam, not several!

So why, ask the Pharisees, did our great lawgiver Moses allow divorce?
Jesus replies:

"Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (Matthew 19:8) In other words divorce was a concession to human sin, not a good or even a neutral thing. But Jesus came to deliver mankind from the power of sin. He came to restore creation to the way God intended. Therefore marriage was for life, and divorce was wrong.

Nowhere in Mark, Luke or Paul's account of Jesus' teaching about marriage is there any hint that remarriage was possible after divorce. So most New Testament scholars agree that the historical Jesus did not countenance it. But David Brewer holds differently: he assumes that Jesus as a first-century Jew must have accepted the common view of his contemporaries that there were circumstances in which divorce followed by remarriage was justified.

This is a very big assumption, and totally contrary to the picture of Jesus presented in the gospels. Time and time again the gospels portray him as contradicting the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees: on forgiving sins (Mark 2), fasting, sabbath observance (Mark 2), washing before meals (Mark 7). He calls the teaching of the Pharisees leaven and human tradition that makes void the word of God (Mark 7: 8-13; 8: 15). Knowing that his teaching conflicted with theirs the scribes and Pharisees came to trap him into saying something they could take as heretical (Mark 8: 11; 12: 15). Humanly speaking it was Jesus' disagreement with the scribes and Pharisees that led to his crucifixion.

And the gospels tell us that it was because the Pharisees realised his teaching on divorce conflicted with theirs that they came to test him, that is to try and catch him out. (Mark 10: 2; Matthew 19: 3). But if Brewer is right, then Jesus actually did agree with the Pharisees! The disciples evidently did not think he did, because when he had made the pronouncement about divorce and remarriage, they exclaim: "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." (Matthew 19:10) So to say, 'Because first-century Jews allowed divorce and remarriage, Jesus must have too' is quite contrary to the picture of Jesus in the gospels.

The second fallacy in Brewer's position is that it is not quite true that a divorcee was 'free to marry *any* man'. Not only does Leviticus 18 exclude some potential partners, but Jews and Romans agreed that one person you could not marry was the man with whom you had an affair!

Just think how many second marriages that would rule out today! So the Jews of Jesus day did recognise a ban on some second marriages. His blanket ban was not a total innovation.

Finally, and most important, the early church banned remarriage after divorce. Church members who remarried were excommunicated. They were excluded from church life for years, sometimes for life. We learn this by reading the fathers, that is early Christian theologians of the first five centuries. They are dogmatic that this is what Christ taught. And these theologians spoke Greek, the language of the New Testament, as their mother tongue. They understood the New Testament more easily than any modern scholar. So we should be very wary of interpreting it differently from them.

Furthermore historians find it impossible to imagine how the early church could have come to this view, if Jesus had not forbidden divorce and remarriage to his disciples. Jews and Romans allowed divorce followed by remarriage in some circumstances. If Jesus did too, how on earth could the whole church throughout the Roman empire, within a few decades of the gospels being written, have come to the opposite conclusion? The practice of divorce and remarriage is not an erudite theological doctrine that mattered only to theologians: it potentially affected every Christian family in the church. Surely if earlier church practice had been more liberal allowing divorce and remarriage, somebody would have protested and said, ‘This is not what the apostles taught us’? But whereas there were furious controversies about some other doctrines, there is total unanimity among early Greek writers on the prohibition or remarriage after divorce.

But does Jesus’ saying that to divorce and marry another is to commit adultery mean that separation is allowable? Luke and Mark’s versions of Jesus’ teaching would seem to leave separation without remarriage as a possibility. Matthew’s gospel addresses this issue explicitly. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery.” (Matthew 5:32) Under Jewish and Roman law a spouse guilty of adultery had to be divorced. In this situation Jesus implies that the innocent party is not guilty of adultery by conceding a divorce. By implication divorces on other grounds are condemned. But even in the case of divorce for sexual immorality, Jesus does not allow remarriage Matthew 5:32 continues: “And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” This is why the disciples protest so vehemently when Jesus repeats his teaching in Matthew 19.

But we shall now examine these passages a little more closely. First 5: 32 begins: ‘Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery.’ This saying is unusual in that it says the act of divorce causes the woman to commit adultery. How can divorce by itself be said to cause adultery? The likeliest explanation is that the woman will be forced by economic or social pressure to remarry and therefore, because she is still bound by marriage vows to her husband, will commit adultery against him. But this is a side issue. The real point is that the husband who initiates the divorce has thereby himself caused the seventh commandment to be broken. All the blame is being transferred to the man.

This is of a piece with the rest of Jesus’ exposition of the commandment at this point in the Sermon. Contrary to much Jewish thinking which tended to blame women for sexual sins, Jesus focuses all his attention on the male and the steps men must take to avoid falling into temptation. It is the man who looks at a woman lustfully in v. 28. It is the man who must tear out his right eye or cut off his right hand in vv. 29-30. It is the man who causes the woman to commit adultery in v. 32a or commits adultery himself in v. 32b.

Not only is the focus on the man in this section, but there is a progression in the seriousness of the man’s sin. It begins in the man’s mind, ‘adultery in the heart’, develops in his eyes, and then his hand. Next it becomes adultery by proxy (‘make her commit adultery), and finally he commits adultery himself by marrying a divorced woman.

Within this context the exception clause simply notes that should a wife have already committed adultery herself, the most likely form of sexual immorality in this context, her husband can hardly be said to have made her commit adultery, when current Roman or Jewish law compelled him to divorce her for her misbehaviour. There is no suggestion here that by divorcing her for sexual immorality a husband gains the right to marry again. That is simply not in the frame of discussion here. The most that permissive interpreters can claim is that this text leaves open the possibility that an innocent husband may remarry. This text certainly does not authorise remarriage in such circumstances. All it says is that divorcing an adulterous wife cannot be construed as making her commit adultery.

But the whole tenor of the passage suggests a permissive interpretation is wrong. The point Jesus is focussing on is the man’s responsibility to be loyal to his wife: on how men must make every effort to avoid

transgressing the commandment even in their thought life. To introduce the thought of remarriage in v.32a, where the central concern is to prohibit men from even divorcing their wives, is surely most unlikely. It becomes even more unlikely when we reach v.32b where marrying any divorced woman is the climax of Jesus' exposition of the seventh commandment's implications. Contextually therefore a reading which allows for remarriage after some divorces in 32a misses both the central thrust of this section, its focus on male waywardness, and the way it builds to its climax in 32b.

Remarriage readings also lead to an illogicality in verse 32. Such an interpretation could also be said to offer a perverse incentive to sexual immorality. For if the only circumstance in which someone is free to remarry is when the spouse has committed adultery, one could envisage a partner in a desperate marriage encouraging the other to commit adultery just in order to ensure freedom to remarry instead of mere separation. But this type of casuistry seems far removed from Jesus' approach in this passage. In context here he is condemning every kind of infidelity, not providing excuses for remarriage.

This reading of Matthew 5: 32 suggests that far from giving an escape clause from Jesus' condemnation of remarriage found in the other gospels, Matthew could be underlining the strictness of Jesus' teaching against divorce itself. According to Matthew 5: 32b (whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery) Mark 10: 11-12 (whoever divorces...and marries another commits adultery) and Luke 16: 18 (everyone who divorces and marries another commits adultery), it is divorce followed by the act of marriage that is equivalent to adultery. But according to Matthew 5: 32 (everyone who divorces his wife...makes her commit adultery) divorce by itself can lead to the breaking of the seventh commandment. As we have noted the exception clause exonerates the divorcing spouse from this charge where the partner has already been unfaithful, but we should not miss the point that in other cases of divorce, e.g. on grounds of incompatibility, the initiator of divorce is charged with breaking the seventh commandment. This is not suggested in Mark or Luke. This is what makes Matthew look stricter than the other synoptics.

I would therefore sum up Matthew's version of Jesus' words in three statements

1)Divorce + remarriage = adultery (5: 32b cf Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18)

2)Divorce alone (except for *porneia*) = adultery (5: 32a)

These two statements can be combined into:-

3) Divorce (except for *porneia*) + remarriage = adultery (19: 9). Statement 3 is an elliptical summary of statements 1 and 2, or at least is the way a reader who has absorbed the significance of 5: 32 could abbreviate them.

Having established that Matthew 5: 32 offers no support for permissive interpretations, but if anything is more severe than sayings in the other gospels, I now wish to argue that the same sense best fits 19: 9, ‘whoever divorces his wife, except for *porneia*, and marries another, commits adultery.’

To understand Matthew 19: 9 correctly, it is very important to read it in context and to understand how it fits into Jesus’ argument. It comes in the course of a debate with the Pharisees about the justification for divorce. ‘Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?”’ This is slightly different from the way Mark phrases the Pharisaic question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” (Mark 10: 3). Matthew clearly situates the debate in the context of intra-Jewish disputes about reasons for divorce, whereas Mark simplifies the debate to bring out the essence of the dispute for Gentile readers. In Matthew 19: 3 Jesus is asked to say on whose side he is when it comes to allowing for divorce: does he agree with the conservative Shammaites, who allowed divorce on very few grounds, or with the liberal Hillelites?

Before looking at Jesus’ argument about divorce, we should point out that the pattern of the debate here is typical of many in the gospels. 1) Someone asks a question. 2) Jesus attacks the very foundations of his opponents’ position. 3) Then they counterattack raising objections from Scripture to his views. 4) Jesus dismisses these objections. 5) Then the disciples interject their difficulties about Jesus’ teaching. 6) Finally Jesus reaffirms his own position and challenges his disciples to have faith and accept it.

This is the pattern in 19: 16 – 30

Question of Rich Man: What good deed must I do to have eternal life? (v. 16)

Jesus’ Fundamental Challenge: Why do you ask me about what is good? Keep the commandments. (v. 17)

Rich Man’s Counter: Which ones? (v. 18) What do I still lack? (v. 20)

Jesus’ Dismissal: Go sell what you possess. (v. 21) It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (v. 24)

Disciples' Objection: Who then can be saved?(v. 25)

Jesus' Reaffirmation: With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.(v.26)

The divorce debate just a few verses earlier follows the same pattern

1) *Pharisees' Question:* Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause? (v.3)

2) *Jesus' Fundamental Challenge to Principle of Divorce:* "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 they shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." (vv. 4 - 6)

3) *Pharisees' Counterattack:* They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" (v. 7)

4) *Jesus' Dismissal of Objection:* "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (vv. 8 - 9)

5) *Disciples' Objection:* The disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." (v. 10)

6) *Jesus' Reaffirmation of his Position:* But he said to them, "Not everyone can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it." (vv. 11 - 12)

The most important point to grasp about this pattern is that Jesus does not back down or make concessions to the original questioner or the disciples when they object to his teaching. Instead he enlarges on his original point or restates it in a vivid way and challenges his hearers to have faith to accept his teaching.

It is this context within the standard pattern of Jesus' confrontation with opponents that makes the permissive interpretation of 19: 9 so unlikely. For this interpretation allowing divorce and remarriage for *porneia*(sexual immorality) makes Jesus agree with one side in the Pharisaic debate. But the whole thrust of his teaching up to this point has been that divorce is contrary to God's creation purposes. When first asked what reasons justify divorce he said: 'Have you not read that he who created them ...said... "they shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.'

The Pharisees correctly read this as a rejection of their concept of divorce, so they counterattack by quoting Deuteronomy 24: 1 against him: ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away?’

We should now expect to Jesus to reject the Pharisaic position and reaffirm his own teaching. The early church interpretation, which we argued above was the natural way to understand Matthew 5: 32, fits this entirely. By ruling out remarriage entirely, and only permitting divorce(i.e. separation) for *porneia* Jesus does show his views are quite different from both the Pharisaic positions. This view also explains the disciples’ objection in verse 10, ‘If such is the case of a man with a wife, it is better not to marry.’

But the permissive view, which permits remarriage in cases of divorce for *porneia* just does not fit. David Catchpole sets out the issues very sharply, and because he assumes an permissive view, blames Matthew for making a real hash of Mark’s ‘consistent, logical and consecutive’ account in 10: 2 – 9. He sees Matthew zigzagging between the Markan Jesus’ no remarriage view and Matthew’s divorce and remarriage view. In Matthew 19: 4 – 6, 8 Jesus adopts ‘a position of extreme rigour’ but this is ‘decisively modified’ in v. 9, ‘so that in a discussion about the Hillelite view Jesus ultimately comes down on the side of Shammai.’ He quotes Merkel, who says ‘In Matthew’s view Jesus is only a Pharisaic scribe.’

As if this were not enough to demonstrate the implausibility of the permissive view, allowing remarriage, Catchpole proceeds to accuse Matthew of yet more *non sequiturs* in the verses that follow. He points out that verse 9 as he interprets it gives no reason for the disciples’ objection in v. 10. ‘If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’ Catchpole comments: ‘Nothing in verses 3 – 9 contains the slightest hint that avoidance of marriage is the best policy: indeed there is nothing which might give grounds for misunderstanding....Since even the rigorous Shammaite view of divorce belongs inside a context where marriage is regarded as thoroughly necessary and normal, the disciples’ reaction in verse 10 is not coherent. So yet more evidence suggests that Matthew’s account is somewhat dislocated.’

Catchpole’s careful reading of the text and his candid admission of the difficulties a permissive interpretation poses is to be applauded. But surely an interpretation which does not force us to conclude that Matthew is illogical, incoherent, and dislocated is preferable? The restrictive early

church interpretation avoids all these problems. There are no self-contradictions within Matthew 19, no clashes with Mark 10, and contextually the debate builds to a crescendo with Jesus trouncing the Pharisees and challenging his disciples to accept his teaching.

This is excellently brought in Quesnell's article, which focuses on the relationship of Matthew 19: 10 – 12 to the preceding section. 'The whole thrust of the passage has been toward building up the greatness and sanctity before God of monogamous marriage, the importance of the bond between spouses, as an expression of the divine will for man from the beginning. Then in verse 10 the disciples reject this picture of life utterly.' 'If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.'

Jesus' response should not be read as a concession to the disciples, as it would be if vv. 10 – 12 are simply a call to celibacy. This is the way many commentators and gospel critics have read it. Such a reading would be totally out of character in Matthew's gospel. 'The ordinary function of the disciples' speeches in the gospels is to ask questions, to misunderstand or object, or simply to advance the action dramatically. They do not enunciate the Christian ideal for life. Their objections are not accepted and confirmed by the Master, but are refuted, or made the occasion for stronger restatements of the original teaching.'

Rather these verses are 'a challenging formulation of the state of a man whose wife has been put away (set loose) on account of porneia.' He may not remarry, so in a sense he is like others who do not marry, those born eunuchs and those made eunuchs by men. 'Having rebuffed the disciples' attack in characteristic fashion – with a rebuke to them for lack of faith necessary to receive the difficult word Jesus repeats the call to understanding: He who can grasp it, let him grasp it.' Similar calls for faith are found in Matthew 13: 9: 'He who has ears, let him hear' and Mark 4: 9. Read this way Matthew 19: 3 – 12 is coherent and logical, building to a climax in the fashion typical of Jesus' disputes with his opponents. There is no need to suppose clumsy editing by the evangelist or Jesus recanting in the face of opposition. These claims are based on misunderstanding Matthew 19: 9 as allowing remarriage after divorce. Within the context of Matthew's gospel, let alone the rest of the New Testament and the witness of the early church, this is a most improbable interpretation.