

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE A CONSIDERATION OF MATTHEW 19:8 AND MARK 10:5.

By Fred Blank

On first reading of these two passages, one gains the impression that Jesus is saying that Moses was influenced by hard hearted people to write a law that permitted them to divorce their wives. In other words, Moses over-rode a divine principle ("from the beginning it was not so") to let people do what they wanted to do, rather than insist that they obey God's original plan for marriage.

Some have explained this as being simply a case of Moses adopting God's "second best".

Can this be what Jesus was trying to convey?

If it was, it creates a number of major problems in understanding the other thoughts expressed by Jesus in the surrounding verses. It is evident that the Pharisees were attempting to test Jesus' views about divorce. They wanted to know how his teaching compared with other prevailing opinions. Hence their question ([Matthew 19:3](#)) "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason*" and ([Mark 10:2](#)) "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*"

In reply, Jesus referred the Pharisees back to Genesis. "*He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female'*". ([Matthew 19:4-6](#))

He concluded by saying, "*that what God has joined together, let not man separate*".

Grasping that this virtually eliminated the question of whether a man can divorce his wife, at all, the Pharisees appealed to Moses. They referred to the only place in the Law of Moses where the subject is addressed, ([Deuteronomy 24:1](#)).

It was from this law that the Pharisees had developed their arguments in support of divorce. It is generally understood by most scholars, that there were in fact two main schools of thought at the time, as to how the decree by Moses applied.

How then are we to understand the thoughts expressed by Jesus, that tend to suggest on cursory reading, that what Moses recorded was the outcome of trying to cater for hard hearted people.

What Jesus goes on to say after making this remark, strongly suggests that we need to take a fresh look at what Jesus was really saying.

In His following statement, Jesus spells out the only situation in which a divorce could be viewed as acceptable.

Was Jesus, introducing an entirely new provision or was he in fact conveying the understanding that Moses had intended in the first place?.

If Jesus was conveying the correct interpretation of what Moses wrote, then his comment, which is commonly understood to say that hard heartedness caused Moses to write a precept to accommodate divorce, must be seriously reviewed

The rendition of [Matthew 19:8](#) in the Amplified New Testament provides a possible clue as to what Jesus was really saying.

It reads, *"Jesus said to them, Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses permitted you to dismiss and repudiate a wife"*.

What was it that permitted them to dismiss and repudiate a wife? It was their hardness of heart!

If this is how this is meant to be understood, then Moses was not writing to give permission for divorce. Rather it was their hardness of heart which permitted them to use what Moses had written, to support their arguments for divorce.

If this is how these difficult words of Jesus are meant to be understood, then it clearly leads one to believe that what Moses wrote was not a decree to support divorce. Understood correctly, it should have limited divorce, to the single cause for which divorce was permissible. Moses had no intention at all, of allowing Jews to divorce their wives, except for that one very limited cause.

Jesus seems to have seen it this way.

It seems more logical to conclude that it was hardness of heart which permitted the Jews to take licence from what Moses wrote, to divorce their wives for many incorrect reasons, than to insist that Moses introduced a concession that cut across God's "perfect will".

Understanding what Jesus meant, in this way, harmonises the teachings of Moses with those of Jesus. Other associated difficulties are removed.

So the difficult words in question, spoken by Jesus, could perhaps be paraphrased as follows:

"Hardness of heart makes you understand what Moses wrote the way you do, but that is not the way it was from the beginning.

Moses meant you to understand that premarital sex is the only valid ground for divorce, and this is an exception rather than the rule.

Finally, if what Moses recorded in [Deuteronomy 24:1](#) was God's "second best", for the benefit of hard hearted people, which of the two prevailing schools of thought in existence in Jesus' day, embraced the correct understanding?

In fact, Jesus was saying that neither view was right!

Thus any grounds for seeing this as a precept to accommodate the wishes of hard hearted people must be invalid.
