

Divorce and Godly Offspring - An Analytical Study of Malachi 2:15

Didn't he make them one,
 united in body and spirit?
And why one?
 Because he wanted them to have godly offspring.
So guard your spirit,
 and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. (My translation)

INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

Of all the verses in the book of Malachi, verse 15 of chapter 2 is perhaps the most difficult to translate. If we look at several translations, we may find such a wide range of readings, that we are left wondering how the translators could have been looking at the same Hebrew text! However, the problem *isn't* that different Hebrew manuscripts (copies of the original) say radically different things; rather the very words in the text - which most, if not all manuscripts agree on - are difficult to interpret. In this paper, we will look at some of the reasons for these difficulties. We will also show that, in spite of these difficulties, we can still gain a basic understanding of what the author was communicating.

Before we begin, two comments need to be made. First, the context of Malachi 2:15 shows us the main focus of this verse - and the verses in the context are *not* difficult to understand. The entire paragraph focuses on God's hatred of divorce. He warns us that he will *not* pay attention to the religious activities of those who break their marriage covenant (promise or vow) - see verses 13-14. It is within this context that our "difficult" verse exists.

Second, we need to keep our perspective balanced. Even though we will be examining a textually difficult passage, we must strongly emphasize that this type of problem occurs in *relatively few* verses in the Bible. In most instances, differences in translations will be due simply to the fact that there are often several ways that a phrase can be accurately translated from one language into a different language, and still communicate the *same* message. But even in those relatively few "difficult" verses (such as the one we will be examining), there will still be basic concepts that we *can* understand with a high degree of certainty. And though we do not have time (in the scope of this paper) to prove it, others have demonstrated that *none of these "difficult" passages contain any issues that could have a serious impact on our faith, or on our understanding of that faith.*

THE FIRST LINE - INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

To begin with, the first part of this verse is rather ambiguous, and could be read (literally) as either: **"Didn't (he) make the one?"** or **"Didn't the one make them (or him/her/it)?"**

A few initial observations we can make are:

(1) The word "one" can go either before or after the verb, thus slightly changing the emphasis. (This is why two potential translations are offered, above.)

(2) Most translators consider this sentence to be a rhetorical question that implies a "yes" answer. Because of this, some translations will write it as a positive statement (such as, "**He made them one**"), rather than a question. This is not a major issue, since there are often many ways to communicate the same message, when going from one language to another.

(3) The word "make" can also be translated as "do," as in somebody "doing" something. (Most translators prefer the word "make," or something equivalent.)

None of these observations, taken by themselves, results in a serious translation difficulty, but they *do* allow for many legitimate ways to translate this verse. When compounded with the existing difficulties, mentioned below, they account for the wide variety of translations that can be found.

THE FIRST LINE - INTERPRETATION PROBLEMS

There are two parts to the interpretation problem found in the first line. The first part involves the question of, "Who made (*or* did) it?"

When we come across pronouns, such as "he" (or "the one," if we interpret the word "one" as going before the verb), we look in the context, in order to determine who it refers to. In this passage, most translators believe that it refers to God. How do they reach this conclusion? Since the context focuses on marital unfaithfulness and divorce, most translators believe that the verse refers to the unity of marriage, with Genesis 2:24 in mind. ("For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." - NASB translation.) If this is the case, the "he" would refer to God, the one who created (or "made") them. This would give us a translation similar to "**God (*or* the Lord, etc.) made them/him/her/it 'one,' "** or "**The one God made them/him/her/it."**

If we accept this view, this leaves us with the question, "What did he make?" The text is ambiguous, but since most translators believe that this verse (and its immediate context) is dealing with God's role in marriage, they will interpret it accordingly: they will focus on the unity of marriage. The differences in translation will center around the way they emphasize this focus. Some translations may center on the marriage union itself, emphasizing that God made "it," as a permanently binding covenant (promise or agreement). Others may translate it as God making "them" - emphasizing *one* man and *one* woman, united in marriage. Still others may say that God made "her" (*one* woman) for the man; or something else. But regardless of how the translator interprets it, we end up with the same message, that there is a "oneness" involved in the marriage relationship - a "oneness" that is incompatible with divorce (v. 16). The implication is that getting a divorce and going after another wife is *not* what God intended. (The emphasis is on the *man* divorcing the *woman*, because, in the days of Malachi, the woman rarely initiated a divorce.)

Interestingly, any of the above interpretations is compatible with the Hebrew text, and none of them leads us into an incorrect understanding of the relationship that exists between the husband and the wife in a marriage.

THE SECOND LINE - THE FIRST OF TWO INTERPRETATIONS

Traditionally, the second line is read as, "**a remnant of the spirit (is) his.**" The word "remnant" can also be translated as "residue." Most seem to interpret the word "spirit" as referring to the Holy Spirit - indicating his unlimited power to create, or perhaps stating that the Holy Spirit is involved in all aspects of marriage. Others, however, see it as a reference to the human spirit (or "breath"). There may be an additional question about who the word "his" refers to, but most translators believe it refers to God.

Generally, those who read this line with the word "remnant" (or "residue") say that, when God made marriage, he designed it as involving a relationship between only one man and only one woman. They would say that God had plenty of "Spirit" (or "spirit") still available after this creative act - whether that word is interpreted as referring to the Holy Spirit (his unlimited power to create) or to the human spirit. In other words, since a "remnant" of Spirit (or spirit) was still available, God could have made additional wives, *if* it had been part of his design in marriage. *But it wasn't his design* - and so a man should not get rid of one wife and go after another.

THE SECOND LINE - THE SECOND OF TWO INTERPRETATIONS

In recent years, more translators have come to the view that the word "**remnant**" should actually be translated as "**flesh**" (or "**body**"). To most people, this can be rather confusing; after all, in the English language, the word "flesh" has little or nothing in common with the word "remnant"! However, this view *does* have a good reason for existing; and with some understanding of Old Testament Hebrew, it makes a lot more sense!

Originally, as with modern Hebrew, the written language did not use vowels. For a person who understood the language, this was rarely a problem. But in the 6th century A.D. (or later), as people were becoming less familiar with the language, Hebrew scholars invented a series of "vowel points" that could be added to the consonants, to help others understand the words. The important issue to remember is this: The original consonants are what the God-inspired prophets wrote down; the vowel points aren't. And because of this, these vowel points - which are not God-inspired - can be, at least occasionally, incorrectly chosen.

This is normally not an issue - there are few places in the Old Testament that even lend themselves to such a question. But in this specific verse, many scholars have concluded that there may have been a vowel point error. This is because one of the words that is often translated as "flesh" is identical with the word translated as "remnant," *except for one vowel point*. It is the difference between "*she-er*" ("flesh" or "blood relative") and "*she-ar*" ("remnant"). Many translators believe that "*she-er*" ("flesh" or "blood relative") fits better, with the connection to Genesis 2:24. The basic emphasis would be the fact that God made them in their totality (or her, or it, etc. - depending on one's interpretation of the first line). He made both body and spirit. Furthermore, most see the passage as indicating the purpose behind this: that *what God "made"* (whether referring to *both* male and female united, or to just one of them) *belongs to him totally* - both body and spirit. And the reason he made them (or her, etc.) was because he "**desired/sought godly offspring**" (the middle of verse 15). He is their maker and owner - and so he has a right to expect (and require) this type of offspring.

THE REST OF THE PASSAGE

The middle of verse 15 shows us the purpose for all this. Again, there is some degree of ambiguity, and the Hebrew words can be translated (literally) in a variety of ways. In the following "translation," three dots (...) are used to distinguish between the individual *Hebrew* words, and a diagonal line (/) is used to separate the various *English* words, which translators often choose for the specific Hebrew word:

"Why/what ... one/he ... seeks/desires/requires ... godly ... offspring/descendants/seed."

Most of these words are synonyms, and any of them can be used, but the specific arrangement of these words will be influenced by our interpretation of the verse. For instance, if we interpret this line as focusing on *God's* desire, we can translate it as a question and an answer, with the word "seek" as *either* part of the question or part of the answer. ("**Why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring.**" Or, "**What was this one seeking? Godly offspring.**") On the other hand, if we believe that the focus is on the marriage union, we would translate it as showing the purpose of marriage: "**Why one? It is for the purpose of raising godly offspring.**" Interestingly, regardless of view, we reach the same ultimate purpose: godly offspring (or descendants, or seed).

The last part of this verse, along with verse 16, gives us a warning. Because of the facts already mentioned, we are to "guard our spirits" and remain faithful to the covenant promise we made with our wife. [In the modern context, we could probably use the word "spouse" (instead of "wife"), since today, women are often just as inclined to initiate a divorce, as are men. This was almost unheard of, in the days of Malachi.]

SOME LESS-COMMON INTERPRETATIONS

There are some other, less generally accepted ways that this verse has been translated. Here are some of them:

One view looks back to the reference about the Jewish nation's forefathers, in verse 10. This view suggests that the "he" (in the first line of v. 15) refers to one of the Jewish ancestors - most likely the greatest of them, Abraham. According to this view, the verse would be saying something like, "**He (Abraham) didn't do such things** (breaking covenant promises, etc.), **did he? Not as long as life (or spirit) remained in him! Why? Because he desired (or sought after) godly offspring (or an offspring from God).**" This would be true, whether we focus on Abraham's faithfulness to his wife, or on his faithfulness in general. The implication would be that we should have the same attitude toward promise-keeping. [A few translators interpret the phrase "**offspring from God**" as meaning "*God-given* offspring," rather than a general statement about *godly* offspring. If applied to Abraham's situation, this could be interpreted as a reference to God's promise that he would have a son - Genesis 18:10, etc.]

Another view combines the first two lines of verse 15, and interprets them as a general statement about people who have the Spirit. With this view, the verse would be translated something like: "**He - anyone who had even a small amount (or residue) of the Spirit - wouldn't do such things, would he?**" (He wouldn't divorce his wife, or break faith in any of the other ways mentioned in the context.) "**Why not? Because he wanted (or sought) godly offspring.**" [The word "do" corresponds to the word "make," which is used in most translations. (The Hebrew word can be translated either way.) Also, the word "spirit" is interpreted as referring to the Holy Spirit.]

There is a view that interprets the "one" (in the first line of v. 15) as referring to a *group* of people, rather than to a husband and his wife. Compared to the unsaved of the world, this "one" group, would be relatively small - a "spiritual remnant" (this view's interpretation of the second line of v. 15). This view would say that God "made" this group of people to be a "godly seed" - children of God. Those who are God's children (his "seed"), would not consider *any* of these covenant-breaking sins, mentioned here or elsewhere in the context, to be legitimate choices. [The word "seed" would figuratively refer to *all* who truly accepted and lived by the teachings of God's Word. It would exclude all the fakes who merely claim to do so.]

THE FIRST MAIN EMPHASIS IN THIS PASSAGE

Perhaps we could find some other views, if we looked far enough. But even if we did, we would discover that there are certain things common to all perspectives. *All* interpretations, even the less-likely ones, center around two basic concepts. We can hold on to these concepts regardless of how certain (or uncertain) we may be about the exact translation of the verse.

The first concept centers on the issue of unity or "oneness." This emphasis begins in verse 10, and stands opposed to what the people were doing - "dealing treacherously," or "breaking faith" with those they were supposed to be "united" with. This "faith breaking" involved not only their relationships with other people, but also their relationship with God.

In the verses we have been examining, the focus is on broken relationships within the family, but in verse 10, we read that broken relationships permeated the entire society: As a nation that was all descended from one ancestor (Abraham), they were brothers. Yet they were "breaking faith" with each other, and destroying this oneness that was supposed to exist between them all (verse 10).

This word "broken" also characterized their relationship with God. Because of promises made to their ancestors (such as Abraham), these people were in a covenant relationship with God. They were a people who belonged to the *only existing* God - the *one* God, the Creator. There was (and is) no other "creator" for them to belong to. Yet in spite of this, they were "breaking faith" with the God who made them, and were choosing to "belong" to false gods that do not even exist (verses 11-12)!

THE SECOND MAIN EMPHASIS IN THIS PASSAGE

In addition to the emphasis on "oneness," there is an emphasis on "guarding our spirit" and on "faithfulness" - a characteristic that had little in common with the people's conduct. We are told to "guard our spirit" so that we will not become guilty of breaking faith - for breaking faith is the opposite of everything God desires in us. This need for us to guard our spirit (and to not break faith) would apply to all the situations found in the context surrounding this verse, such as the relationships we have with our "brothers" and with God. However, the immediate focus in verse 15 is on the marriage relationship and divorce. Divorce was the means by which the people were breaking faith with their spouses, rather than remaining faithful to them. (See also verse 16.)

CONCLUDING REMARKS ABOUT DIVORCE

Regardless of the way we interpret this verse, in each case, we end with approximately the same conclusion: The practices condemned by Malachi - such as divorce - are *incompatible* with godliness.

How serious is divorce? Not only does it destroy the relationship between husband and wife, it can also destroy one's relationship with God. God tells us that he hates it (verse 16). He compares it to covering one's self with violence - wearing violence like clothing. In this passage, God warned the people that, as long as they continued to do this, he would totally ignore their religious activities - activities they thought were pleasing to God (verses 13-14).

How serious is divorce? This "faith-breaking" conduct has an impact that goes beyond one's relationship with God or spouse. Verse 15 suggests that it can even affect the relationship of one's *offspring* with God. Although there is no guarantee that the offspring of *non-divorced* parents will always be *godly*, or that the offspring of *divorced* parents will always be *ungodly*, this passage shows us that the willingness of a parent to do what God *hates* (divorce) has a profound impact on the offspring of that now-broken union.

So what is our conclusion in this matter? We may be unsure about the meaning of certain parts of this passage. We may, or may not, like some of the things these verses seem to be saying. But certain things *can* be known, if we are willing to accept them. And though we may have difficulties in understanding some parts of the text, by the time we get to the end of it, we discover that our moral obligation is very clear.

[Note: This passage focuses on a specific moral obligation. It does not deny the possibility that *genuine* repentance might lessen the impact of some of the consequences that occur when this moral obligation is violated. However, we need to remember that sin *does* have consequences that repentance *cannot* remove. Even if we repent and are eternally forgiven, there may still be consequences we have to endure in this present life. There may also be long-term (and perhaps eternal) consequences that affect others.]

Malachi 2:10-16 (My Translation)

Verses	Comments
<p>10 Don't we all have the same Father? Hasn't one God created us all? Then why do we break faith with each other, and show contempt for the covenant God gave to our fathers?</p>	<p>Or, "father."</p> <p>Covenant = the promise God gave to Israel, at Mt. Sinai. (See Exodus 19:4-6; 24:3, 7-8.)</p>
<p>11 Judah has broken faith; a horribly detestable thing has been done in Israel and in Jerusalem. Judah has shown contempt for the Lord's holy place -- the place He loves -- and has married the daughter of a foreign god.</p>	<p>Contempt for God's holy place = contempt for God himself.</p> <p>Daughters of a foreign god = women who did not worship the God of Israel.</p>
<p>12 May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob every person who does this -- everyone who is aware of what he is doing, and yet brings offerings to the Lord Almighty.</p>	<p>Everyone who is aware... = Lit. "everyone who is awake and can answer" - perhaps a proverbial expression.</p>
<p>13 Here is another thing you do: You cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and crying; because he pays no attention to your offerings, nor accepts them with pleasure from your hand.</p>	
<p>14 You ask, "Why not?" Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have broken faith with her, though she is your companion, the wife of your marriage covenant.</p>	<p>Wife of your youth = the wife you married when you were young.</p> <p>Marriage covenant = marriage vow or promise (same word as in v. 10).</p>
<p>15 Didn't he make them one, united in body and spirit? And why one? Because he wanted them to have godly offspring. So guard your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.</p>	<p>Make them one = a reference to Genesis 2:24.</p> <p>Alternate readings: "...make them one? Both body and spirit belong to him." The traditional interpretation is: "he who had a remnant of the Spirit?" or something similar.</p> <p>Guard your spirit = keep your spirit under guard, to prevent it from wandering.</p>
<p>16 For "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, and "I hate when a person covers his garment with violence," says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.</p>	<p>Divorce, or "sending away" one's wife is considered an act of violence.</p> <p>Covered = perhaps like being smeared with dirt or stains, only this would be a smearing with violence.</p>