

Does God Really Hate Divorce? A Comparative Analysis of Ancient Texts of Mal 2:14–16

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ABSTRACT

Historically, Malachi 2:16 has served as a veto against divorce, especially among African evangelicals. While marriage is ideally a lifelong commitment, this interpretation often overlooks the context of the passage. Many are unaware of its grammatical ambiguities and varying ancient translations. This study examines Malachi 2:14–16 to understand the prophet's views on marriage as a covenant. The findings reveal that the Hebrew word "šallah", commonly translated as "divorce," actually refers to the improper "putting away" of legally married wives without adhering to established guidelines. The study concludes that Malachi's argument refers back to the creation narrative, offering a framework for ethical thinking. While marriage is sacred and should be upheld, those facing divorce should not be seen as irredeemable sinners.

KEYWORDS: Malachi 2:14–16, Divorce, Marriage, Infidelity

A INTRODUCTION

Ideally, marriage is supposed to be a permanent relationship to be honoured. According to the Genesis creation account, God initiated this relationship; hence, throughout the Scriptures, there is a call for faithfulness on the part of both husband and wife (Gen 2:23–24). However, in reality, marital crises, infidelity, divorce and remarriage are age-long problems that have continued in almost all human societies.¹

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Submitted: 16/08/2023; peer-reviewed: 01/03/2024; accepted: 31/05/2024. Obedben M. Lumanze, "Does God Really Hate Divorce? A Comparative Analysis of Ancient Texts of Malachi 2:14–16," *Old Testament Essays* 37 no. 2 (2024): 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2024/v37n2a2>.

¹ Marriage is an age-long tradition, whereby an adult male and female supposedly agree to come together as husband and wife especially for the purposes of companionship and procreation. However, experience and research have shown that marital crisis and divorce cases are at an alarming rate. According to a report in the

During the time of the prophet Malachi, some Jewish men were unfaithful to their legally married (older Jewish) wives and improperly divorced them in order to marry foreign (younger) women.² Hence, the text under study, Mal 2:14–16, discusses Yahweh’s concerns about these cases of unlawful divorce and remarriage.

Over the years, evangelical Christians have used Mal 2:14–16, especially verse 16, “For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce...” to discourage divorce. The verse has often functioned as an absolute veto and any contrary opinion about the meaning of the text is often hastily rejected.³ The challenge is that many who often quote this text to say that God does not permit divorce at all do not consider or are totally unaware of the social context, the grammatical vagueness of the text and the different problematic renditions in various ancient manuscripts. In most cases, the backstory or *Sitz-im-Leben* (socio-historical context) of the passage is often neglected.

Given that the Masoretic Text (MT), Hebrew *Leningradensis* (L), Greek *Sinaiticus* (N), the Targum and the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS), among others, render the passage differently,⁴ many have argued that the text in its present form has been emended or even corrupted over the years. Moreover, these differences, which are somehow difficult to reconcile, have made the proper interpretation or meaning of the text to be obscure. Kaiser acknowledges that, “Malachi 2:10–16 is at once one of the most important and one of the most difficult pericopes in the book of Malachi.” According to him, the passage is “also one of the most succinct statements we have on our Lord's attitude toward divorce.”⁵ Certainly, much of the difficulty borders on the paradoxical grammar, syntax and semantic vagueness of the Hebrew text.

Vanguard newspaper, in 2018, separation rates in Nigeria recorded a 14 percent increase. The present statistics mirror a rather negative trend (cf. vanguardngr.com/2020/10/the-rate-of-divorce-in-nigeria-latest-statistics).

² Charles H. Patterson, *CliffNotes on the Bible* (New York: Wiley Publishing, 2003); Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

³ Jack C. Collins, “Malachi 2:16 Again,” www.academia.edu/Malachi2:16Again/Collins.

⁴ William W. Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons: A Comparative Analysis of Malachi 2:10–16 in the Traditions of the Hebrew *Leningradensis* and the Greek *Sinaiticus*” (MA Diss., McMaster Divinity College), 2013.

⁵ Walter Kaiser, “Divorce in Malachi 2:10–16,” *CTR* 2/1 (1987): 74.

Based on the various problematic renditions of the text in various ancient manuscripts, many interpreters have suggested different interpretations of the text. For example, after studying the LXX version and the Targum, Isaksson concludes that the two versions in no way prohibit divorce; rather, they permit it (cf. v. 16).⁶ His conviction is based on the LXX rendering of the verse: *alla ean misēsas exaposteilēs*: “But if by detesting you should send [her] forth...” and the Targum’s reading: “But if you hate her, divorce her...” Apart from the above incidence, scholars like Milgrom quoted in Hugenberg, for example, insist that Mal 2:14 does not refer to a literal marriage since it suggests that “the husband rather than the bride violates the covenant.”⁷

The purpose of this study is thus to examine the similarities and differences in some ancient versions of Mal 2:14–16 (e.g., the Masoretic Text, LXX and Targum) by analysing their various lexical, syntactical and semantic features in order to understand Malachi’s thoughts on marriage as a covenant (*b^erit*). The diachronic (historical-critical analysis) method of biblical studies is employed in this study. This method is employed because it first takes into consideration the isagogic issues—authorship, purpose of writing, audience, social context and how the text influenced the recipients.

Before doing the comparative lexical and syntactical analysis of the text and making exegetical comments, the historical process and isagogic issues will be examined to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand. According to Kapahu, a comparative lexical analysis allows or helps the exegete “to move beyond text-critical impasses to present the text simply as one that is received by a community as Scripture-seen, read and interpreted within their unique language or cultural context.”⁸

B EXEGESIS OF MAL 2:14–16

1 Overview of the person and the book of Malachi

The book of Malachi is among the “Book of the Twelve Prophets” often referred to as the “Minor Prophets” and the last book of the Old Testament in

⁶ Abel Isaaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple: A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19.13–12 and 1 Cor. 11.3–16* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965).

⁷ Paul G. Hugenberg, *Marriage as a Covenant: A Study of Biblical Law and Ethics Governing Marriage Developed from the Perspective of Malachi (VTSup 52; Leiden: Brill, 1994)*, 4.

⁸ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 18.

the Christian canon.⁹ The name, Malachi means “My Messenger” or “My Angel” and is not mentioned outside of the book bearing his name. Thus, some scholars argue that Malachi cannot be used as a proper name but it refers only to the office of a messenger.¹⁰ However, Archer,¹¹ Robinson,¹²Folarin¹³ and many other scholars agree that Malachi is the proper name of the author of the book.

It is difficult to date the book of Malachi. This is because, unlike Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi contains no date. Nevertheless, Levy affirms that Malachi was the last Old Testament book to be written and that the book was written about one hundred years after Cyrus decreed that the people of Judah could return to their land (538 BCE). During this period, there was a reformation of the Jewish religion by Ezra and Nehemiah. However, before long, priests and people became indifferent to their religious heritage and morally corrupt. The prophet thus exposed Judah’s sins and pronounced that Yahweh would soon judge the people unless they repented and returned to Him.¹⁴

The book also lacks any reference to persons (unlike Ezra or Nehemiah, for example), which the modern reader can use to specify the date of writing. However, some of the concerns of the prophet Malachi can be used to guess the approximate date of the book. For example, Malachi mentions a functioning temple (1:10; 3:1, 10), which places it after 515 BCE. Furthermore, the prophet addresses similar issues that faced Ezra-Nehemiah—a corrupt priesthood (Neh 13:28–31), marriages outside the covenant faith and divorce (Ezra 9:1–15; Neh 13:23–28), immorality, social injustice and marginalisation of the poor (Neh 5:1–13; 13:15–22) as well as neglect of the tithes and offerings (Neh 13:10–12).

Consequently, some scholars argue that Malachi may have been contemporaneous with Ezra and Nehemiah or that he probably lived before

⁹ The prophet was one of the post-exilic prophets and the last prophet that ministered to Judah.

¹⁰ Arnold and Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament*, 470.

¹¹ Archer L. Gleason, *A Survey of the Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974).

¹² George L. Robinson, *The Twelve Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publication, 1978).

¹³ George O. Folarin, *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (Bukuru, Jos: ACTS Books, 2004).

¹⁴ David M. Levy, *Malachi: Messenger of Rebuke and Renewal* (Bellmawr: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1992).

them.¹⁵ Some scholars date Malachi earlier in the fifth century (between 500 BCE and 475 BCE), which is possible, while others argue that the prophet ministered shortly after Nehemiah, who served as governor in Jerusalem from 445 BCE until 434 or 433 BCE¹⁶

2 Genre of Mal 2:14–16

Genre refers to the literary form of a text. The German translation of genre is *Gattung or Gattungen*. According to Obiorah, the Bible is written in different literary forms such as narrative, proverb, aetiology, homily, prayer, law, parable and so forth.¹⁷ With respect to the form of its prophecy, many agree that Malachi has a style that is unique amongst the Old Testament prophetic books.¹⁸ Murray describes the book as a “prophetic disputation”;¹⁹ while Hendrix sees it as a “confrontational dialogue.”²⁰ For some, it is more of a “sermonic text.”²¹ Malachi 2:14–16 and most of the book are written in a rhetorical manner (question and answer method—a form of prophetic dispute).

¹⁵ John L. Macky, *Haggi, Zechariah and Malachi* (Pearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2003); Anthony R. Petterson, “The Book of Malachi in Biblical-Theological Context,” *SBJT* 20/3 (2016).

¹⁶ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); Clendenen E. Ray, “Malachi,” in *Haggai, Malachi* (NAC 21A; ed. Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2004); Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Vol 28; TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

Note that Jerusalem was probably destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC (cf. 2 Kgs 25). Almost fifty years later (539 BC), Cyrus, the Persian king, conquered and annexed Babylon into the Persian Empire and decreed that those peoples whom the Babylonians had earlier exiled to Babylon could return to their native lands and rebuild their temples. This included the Jewish people (Ezra 1:1–4).

¹⁷ Mary J. Obiorah, *Bibliotheca Divina: A Basic Introduction to the Study of the Bible* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Clendenen, “Malachi,” Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on The Book of Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Robert B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Minor Prophets: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018); Kaiser Walter C. and Leland Ryken, *Micah-Malachi. The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

¹⁹ Donald F. Murray, “The Rhetoric of Disputation: Re-examination of a Prophetic Genre,” *JSOT* 38. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/030908928701203808>.

²⁰ John D. Hendrix, “‘You Say’: Confrontation Dialogue in Malachi,” *RevExp* 84 (1987): 465–477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463738708400310>.

²¹ Ronald W. Pierce, “Literary Connectors and a Haggai/Zechariah/Malachi Corpus,” *JETS* 27 (1984): 285.

As will be discussed later, the text of Mal 2:14–16 is, in the words of Craigie, “notoriously difficult to interpret.”²² The verses, especially verse 15, are extremely difficult to translate from Hebrew. The text in its present form may have been emended or modified by rabbis and scribes over time.

Malachi 2:14–16 can be taken as a single literary unit. It is written in a question-and-answer manner. It is a form of prophetic dispute and the major issue (topic) the prophet addresses, starting from verse 10, is unfaithfulness and the sending away of faithful wives by the people of Judah, including the priestly class. The major characters in the text are Yahweh, the prophet (Malachi) and the people of Judah.

3 Historical Background and Literary Context of the Text

The Babylonian exile brought a lot of hardship to the Judeans. It also shook their faith in Yahweh because the people wondered why Yahweh would allow pagans to invade the Holy City of Jerusalem and destroy the great Temple, where He is believed to dwell. Furthermore, after the exile, the Jews had expected the prophecies of the restoration by Deutero-Isaiah and those of Haggai and Zechariah to come to pass immediately. However, when they had waited for a long time and instead of having peace and economic prosperity, they were still suffering and facing a lot of attacks and opposition from their enemies, their trust in Yahweh began to wane. The exile and the challenges they faced after many years of their return were a sore perplexity to them. It affected their faith in Yahweh. Does it mean that all of Yahweh’s promises of restoration were shams? Many years had passed and Yahweh had not redeemed His people from bondage and/or foreign domination as He promised. This distrust in Yahweh was the fundamental evil with which the author of Malachi had to deal.²³

Malachi thus ministered in a period when many Jews had become sceptical about their religion and/or national deity, Yahweh. During this period, the people began to lack faith in Yahweh’s love and this may have been

²² Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets* (Vol 2; The Daily Study Bible Series; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

²³ For more details, see David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis to Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999); Rainer Albertz, *From the Exile to the Maccabees* (A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period 2; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994); Richard J. Coggins and Jin H. Han, *Six Minor Prophets through the Century: Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi* (Malden: Wiley & Sons, 2011) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444342826>.

the root of the immorality and unfaithfulness witnessed during the time of the prophet. Hence, Malachi was called to confront a population given to religious cynicism and political scepticism.²⁴ Of course, the worship was, perhaps, the first to be affected. The services of the temple were maintained but in a slovenly or careless fashion. The priests did not hesitate to offer in the sanctuary bread that was polluted and animals that were blind and blemished, such as they would not think of presenting to their own governor (cf. Mal 1:7–8). Levy remarks that during the time of Malachi, the priests and people became apathetic and morally corrupt.²⁵

Commenting on the above issue, Barton and Boloje and Groenewald all affirm that the weakening of the religious life in Malachi's day was obvious and that it had grave social implications. Both the priests and laity were perverse.²⁶ Wrong and distorted views of God and false forms of worship inevitably led to fractured social relationships. Hence, "divorce (cf. 2:13–16) and adultery (3:5) were so common that the total destruction of Jewish families seemed almost imminent. Yahweh's established system of ordered community was subverted."²⁷

The attitude of the priests affected the people; they did not take their religion and God seriously. They became tired of worshipping Yahweh and thus offered to him animals that were sickly, blind and blemished (cf. 1:7–8). The priests, whose lips should keep knowledge and from whose mouths the people should seek the law, were not interested in teaching and guiding the people to do the right thing. Instead, they turned many aside and caused them to stumble, so that the whole ceremonial service became contemptible (cf. 2:9–10).

Furthermore, during this period, sins like perjury, oppression of the poor and perversion of justice were prevalent (3:5). Another ubiquitous practice was the tendency toward foreign alliances via marriage. This practice was

²⁴ Boloje O. Blessing and Groenewald Alphonso, "Literary Analysis of Covenant Themes in the Book of Malachi," *OTE* 28/2 (2015): 257–282. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2015/v28n2a4>.

²⁵ Levy, *Malachi*.

²⁶ Barton John, "Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem," in *The Place Is Too Small for Us: The Israelite Prophets in Recent scholarship* (SBTS 5; ed. Robert P. Gordon; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 90; Boloje and Groenewald, "Literary Analysis of Covenant Themes," 257–258.

²⁷ Thus, the prophet revealed Judah's sins and proclaimed that judgment would be forthcoming unless the people returned to God. Cf. Barton, "Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem," 91.

condemned by Ezra and Nehemiah. Commenting on the issue, Gray, quoted in Smith, notes that these alliances (marriages) were made for political and socio-economic reasons. The returned Jews had no other way to “strengthen their rather uncertain status than by marrying the sons and daughters of the Samaritans and the renegade Jews that had attained positions of considerable affluence during the period of the exile.”²⁸

Marrying the daughters of these well-to-do Samaritans and Jews warranted the people, that is, returned Jews to divorce their former (legal) wives. It is in that context that Yahweh said, “For I hate putting away.”²⁹ Commenting on this incident, Gray further notes,

Many of the leaders, including doubtless the priests themselves, united in marriage to the wealthy people of the land, to accomplish which they had resorted to divorce; and the mass of the people so far sunk in despair that they had almost ceased to believe that God cared for them, or that they had any duty to perform toward him.³⁰

During the time of Malachi, the people of Judah were living in deception. They had profaned the covenant community by marrying foreign women (idol worshippers) and divorcing their legal (believing) wives who were faithful to them. They were probably marrying the daughters of landowners for selfish (political and socio-economic) reasons. The worst of it all was that the gentile wives they married rejected the culture and religion of the Jews. Kroeger states the matter more clearly:

Malachi condemned the people for setting aside their believing wives to forge more advantageous matches with the daughters of local landowners (Mal 2:11–14). Forbidden intermarriage had brought acculturation with the heathen rather than a perseverance in God’s call to holiness (Ezra 9:1–2; cf. Deut 7:3–4; Exod 34:15–16). These marriages were a violation of the covenant itself (Ezra 9:10–15) and constituted a threat to the continuing faith of Israel. It was

²⁸ Powis J. M. Smith, “The Recent History of Old Testament Interpretation,” *JR* 6/4 (1926): 403–424.

²⁹ Consequently, these former wives became helpless and often would go to Yahweh’s altar to cry; the prophet depicts and condemns this act of putting away (Mal 2:10–16).

³⁰ Smith, “The Recent History of Old Testament Interpretation,” 407.

just such intermarriage and acculturation that had destroyed the identity of the ten northern tribes.³¹

These men mistreated and abused their former wives who had been committed and loyal to them. Thus, the prophet’s words that God hated the covering of one’s wife with violence may refer to spousal abuse within these marriages. As stated above, Yahweh did not like or support this mistreatment; hence, the prophet rebuked them and exhorted them to be faithful to their covenant with Yahweh.

4 Hebrew Text of Mal 2:14–16

14 וְאַמְרַתֶּם עַל-מָה עַל כִּי־הָיָה הָעֵיד בֵּינֵךְ וּבֵין אִשְׁתֵּי נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה בָּגַדְתָּ בָּהֶן וְהִיא חִבְרָתְךָ וְאִשְׁתֵּי בְרִיתְךָ:
 15 וְלֹא־אָחַד עָשָׂה וּשְׂאֵר רוּחַ לֹוּ וּמָה הָאָחַד מִבְּקֶשׁ זֶרַע אֱלֹהִים וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם בְּרוּחְכֶם וּבְאִשְׁתֵּי נְעוּרֶיךָ אֶל־יִבְגְּדוּ:
 16 כִּי־שָׁנֵא שִׁלַּח אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִסָּה חֶמְסַ עַל־לְבוּשׁוֹ אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת וְנִשְׁמַרְתֶּם בְּרוּחְכֶם וְלֹא תִבְגְּדוּ: ס

Hebrew transliterated text of Mal 2:14–16

v.14: *wa’āmartem ‘al-māh ‘al kî-Yhwh hē ‘îd bēn^ekā ūbēn ‘ēšet n^e ‘ūrēka ‘ašer ‘attāh bāgattāh bāh w^ehî’ ḥabert^eka w^e ‘ēšet b^erîtekā*
 v.15: *w^elô’- ‘ehād ‘āsāh ūš^e ‘ār rū^ah lô ūmāh hā ‘ehād m^ebaqqeš zera ‘^elôhîm w^enišmartem berûhākem ūb^e ‘ēšet n^e ‘ūrēka ‘al-yibggōd.*
 v.16: *kî-sānē’ šallah ‘āmar Yhwh ‘elôhē yiśrā’ēl w^ekissāh ḥāmās ‘al-l^ebūšō ‘āmar Yhwh š^ebā’ôt w^enišmartem berûhākem w^elô’ tibggōdû*

C TEXTUAL APPARATUS FOR MAL 2:14–16

Many believe that the text under study has been corrupted over the years, which accounts for the various different (problematic) renditions and interpretations of the passage. The MT, Hebrew Leningradensis (L), Greek Sinaiticus (N), the Targum and the DSS, among others, render the text differently.³² These differences, as earlier stated, are somehow difficult to reconcile and also make the proper interpretation or meaning obscure. Certainly, much of the difficulty lies in the paradoxical grammar, syntax and

³¹ Kroeger C. Catherine, “The Biblical Option of Divorce,” *Priscilla Paper* 13/4 (1999): 17.

³² Kaiser, “Divorce in Malachi 2:10–16,”; Collins, “Malachi 2:16 Again,”; Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,”.

semantic vagueness of the Hebrew text. The paradoxical nature of the text and the problem of textual corruption found in the corpus of the text have continued to frustrate translators and interpreters over the years.

1 Various Renditions of Mal 2:14–16

Verse	Masoretic Text (MT)	Septuagint (LXX)	Targum Jonathan (Pseudo-English Version)
14b	<i>'ašer 'attāh bāgattāh bāh</i> : “whom you have dealt treacherously with”	<i>ēnegkatelipes</i> : whom you forsook.”	The Targum reads, “whom you have deceived...”
15	<i>w^ēlō' - 'eḥād 'āsāhūšē 'arrū^ahlō</i> : Did He not make them one, even a remnant of spirit belonging to him?	<i>kai ou kalon epoiese kai hupo leimma pneumatos autou</i> : And no good (one) did this even the remnant of his spirit.	Was not Abraham one alone from whom the world was made?
15c	<i>ūmāhhā 'eḥād m^ebaqqeš zera' 'ēlōhīm</i> : And what was the one seeking? Godly offspring.	<i>kai ei pateti alloē spermazētei ho theos</i> : And I said, “What else does God seek but offspring?”	And what was (that) one seeking except that offspring should be established for him from the Lord?”
16a	<i>kī-šānē' šallah 'āmarYhwh 'ēlōhēyisrā'ēl</i> : For the one who hates and divorces, says the Lord, the God of Israel...	<i>Alla ean misēsas exapostilēs legei kurios theos tou yisraēl</i> : But if you hate her and divorce her says the Lord...	“But if you hate her, divorce her, says the Lord God of Israel...”

2 English Translation of the Text: *Working Translation*

Verse 14: But you say what (why) is Yahweh a witness between you and between the wife of your youth (with) whom you have been faithless against her though she is your companion and the wife of your covenant

Verse 15: and has he not made (them one) with the remnant of his spirit and what was the one God seeking? seed of God. So, you are to guard yourselves

in the spirit of you (guard your spirit) and do not be faithless with the wife of your youth.

Verse 16: For He hates putting away (to send out) says Yahweh the God of Israel, and he covers his garment on violence that sends his faithful wife away says the LORD of host. So, you are to guard yourselves in the spirit of you (in your spirit) and do not be faithless.

3 Close Reading of the Text

3a The prophet confronts the people with their sin of unfaithfulness in marriage (v.14)

Verse 14 starts with a comparable conjunction with the verb of speech: וַאֲמַרְתֶּם/*wa^amar^etem*. The Hebrew particle/conjunction, *wa^amar^etem* is a *Qal* perfect second person masculine plural derived from the root אָמַר/*amar*, meaning “to say.” In the Hebrew, it is taken as an adversative, “but you said.” However, in the LXX, *kai eipate* is understood as a linking phrase, “and you said.” According to Kapahu, the later translation, “and you said,” is “a consistent trait of both traditions understood in every occurrence found throughout Malachi”³³ (cf. 1:2, 6, 7, 13; 2:14, 17; 3:7, 13).

Waltke and O’Connor have observed that when the adversative *wa^amar^etem*, as found in the MT version is attached with the particle/preposition *‘al* and the interrogative pronoun *mā^h* (why), the verse 14 then aligns with verse 13 and the progressive logic of the *pericope*.³⁴ Kapahu mentions that the question, “why” is clearly associated with Yahweh’s unfavourable reception of the offerings in verse 13. According to him, the construct, אֶל-מָה/*al-mā^h* points out that the Hebrew prepositions *‘alkî* is to be understood as equivalent to the Greek word *hoti* (meaning: “because”), which introduces the following causal clause and obviously it is only in this text that the particle is connected to Yahweh. In the text, Yahweh is placed before “witness” probably for the sake of emphasis.³⁵

Although the Hebrew *‘ūd* can be translated or interpreted in many ways— “to go round,” “circle around,” “embrace,” “warn,” “assure,” “to call as a witness” and so forth, in the present context, it is better translated as “to

³³ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 65.

³⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

³⁵ Hill E. Andrew, “Malachi, Book of” (DOTP; ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

serve as a witness” against.³⁶ The LXX translates *‘údas dia martureō* (warn, testify against or witness). However, this Greek word carries “a more ominous disposition, almost exclusively used in passages concerning rebuke or warning.”³⁷

Furthermore, the idiomatic phrase, בֵּינָם/*bên^eka* usually translated as “between” is significant here. The LXX renders it *ana meso*, which can be literally translated as “going up the middle.” However, this Hebrew word, *bên^eka* has legal connotations. Muraoka observes that the word is often used with special regard to legal matters especially when two or more parties are involved; and that of course is the sense found here. It can be found elsewhere as in Gen 3:15; 31:48; 1Sam 20:13; Ezek 4:3 and Mal 2:14.³⁸ Interestingly, Gen 3:15 and the present text Mal 2:14 are identical. Both of them refer to hostile relationships towards the *‘iššā^h* (woman). While Genesis talks about the hostility or enmity between the serpent and the woman, Malachi talks about treachery done against women (wives) by the men of Judah. Hence, “the Lord is a witness between you and [between] the wife of your youth.” The Hebrew noun *n^e ‘ûrēka* from the root נַעַר/*na‘ar* translated as *neotēs* in the LXX refers to “youth” especially a younger person.³⁹

Verse 14b: *‘ašer bāgāḏ^ettā^h ‘attā^h bā^h* (“whom you have dealt treacherously with”). The LXX has “ἣν εγκατέλιπες/*ēn egkatelipes* (“whom you forsook”) while the Targum reads “whom you have deceived...”

Verse 14c: *v^ehī’ ḥ^aver^ett^ekav^e ‘ēshet b^erīteka* (“though she is your companion and your wife by covenant”). The LXX renders this verse thus, *kai autē koinōnos sou kai gunē diathēkēs* (“though she is your companion and the wife of your covenant”).

Verse 14b starts with a relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר/*‘ašer*, which the LXX renders as ἣν/*hen*. According to Hill, this relative pronoun is used to introduce a dependent relative clause. The verb בָּגַד/*bāgāḏ* is a *Qal* perfect 2nd person masculine singular.⁴⁰ Whereas it is constructed in verse 10 as a plural, here it is used as a singular indicating that it is directed against the wife rather than the

³⁶ Samuel R. Driver, Francis Brown, Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 730.

³⁷ J. Lust, E. Eynikel and K. Hauspie, *Analytical Lexicon to the Septuagint* (Carol Stream: Hendrickson Academic, 2009).

³⁸ Takamitsu A. Muraoka, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Rev. ed.; Louvain: Peeters, 2009).

³⁹ *BDB*, 655.

⁴⁰ Hill, *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*.

brother. Thus, the former covenant in verse 10 applied to all Judah but the one in verse 14 applied specifically to marriage between a man and a woman. Furthermore, it should be noted that הָאָתָּה/’attāh, which is a second person pronoun is used together with הַבָּגָד/bāḡad^ettā^h which is already in second person. Kapahu, following Waltke, O’Connor and Muraoka, notes that the usage of a second person pronoun with a verb already in second person is intentionally done to convey “strong emotional heightening.”⁴¹

Hill further observes that הַבָּ/bā^h is used by the author to draw the focus or attention of the audience to the unfavourable conditions of the wives who were being mistreated. The use of the Hebrew word *h^aberet* (which is from the root *hābar* meaning “to be joined”) with its derivatives is used here to emphasise the importance of marriage. Here the author uses the word *h^aberet* as a special designation for “wife.”⁴² This usage is significant; it shows that marriage is a God-honoured relationship.⁴³ For Malachi, the marriage institution is a covenant institution honoured by God.

3b The prophet counters the people of the need to be faithful to their lawful wives (v.15)

Verse 15a: *welō*’-’*ehād*’ *’āsā^h* (“Did He not make them one”),

Verse 15b: *’ūs^e’ār rūah lō* (“even a remnant of spirit belonging to him”).

The expression, הַשֵּׁי אֵלַי וְלֹא יָשָׁר /*welō*’-’*ehād*’ *’āsā^h* is somewhat difficult to translate. It is best to take it as a question, “Did he not make one?” However, Jones Barry sees these three words thus, “not one has done”⁴⁴ while Schreiner and Tosato all quoted in Hugenberg, read the phrase as אֵלַי וְלֹא (“no one”).⁴⁵ Various ancient manuscripts render the above verse differently. The LXX reads, *καὶ οὐ καλὸν ἐποίησε καὶ ὑπὸ λείμμα πνεύματος αὐτοῦ/kai ou kalon epoiese kai hypo leimma pneumatou autou* (“And no good (one) did this even the remnant of his spirit”). The Targum renders this verse 15a differently: “Was not Abraham one alone from whom the world was made?”

A comparison of the sentence structure of the above verse shows that it is similar to that of verse 10. Many believe that the author of Malachi uses the word *’ehād* here to describe the oneness realised through marriage as stated in

⁴¹ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 69.

⁴² Hill, *DOTP*.

⁴³ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 69.

⁴⁴ Barry A. Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon* (Atlanta: Scholars, SBL Dissertation Series, 1995).

⁴⁵ Hugenberg, “Marriage as a Covenant,”

the Genesis creation account (2:24). Hence, marriage is traditionally believed to bind the man and the woman as one.⁴⁶ Kaiser acknowledges,

Even though there is no explicit indication in the first clause of v.15 that it is an interrogative or that by "he," the prophet means God, both possibilities are accepted here as being consistent with the context and Hebrew grammar and syntax. The resulting thought would be this: why did God make Adam and Eve only one [flesh] when he might have given Adam many wives, for God certainly had more than enough residue of the Spirit in his creative power to furnish multiple partners? So why only one? Because! God was seeking a godly offspring, but multiple partners would not have been conducive to this result.⁴⁷

The above views of Kaiser may be in order since Jesus also made the same allusion in the New Testament when He said that from the beginning, He (God), from the beginning (referring to the Genesis creation account), made them (Adam and Eve) male and female. Jesus further mentioned that marriage binds the man and the woman as one (Matt 19:4ff). Certainly, God had every power to make more partners for the man He created but He did not because He was seeking “godly offspring.” However, going by the Targum’s rendition, the meaning of the text becomes entirely different; it focuses on Abraham and not on Adam and Eve. The prophet thus may have alluded to the story of Abraham to encourage his audience to be faithful to their legally married wives.

Commenting on the Hebrew text, Hill and Kapahu observe that the ו of verse 15b can then be seen in the exegetical sense and understood as “even.”⁴⁸ As stated above, it is difficult to translate verse 15a–b. The argument has been, should *καὶ οὐ* in the LXX be rendered as a question or as a statement? A good number of scholars hold that since in most cases where *καὶ οὐ* appears, it is often rendered as a statement (cf. Gen 4:11; 8:10; Prov 14:4), it should be rendered the same here and not otherwise. It is better to translate *καὶ* as “and.”

Though there is the possibility that verse 15a can be read in the light of the creation account and the first marital union in Gen 2:18, the Greek that is presented in verse 15a remains grammatically difficult to translate or work

⁴⁶ Baker W. David, *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*. (NIVACS; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

⁴⁷ Kaiser, “Divorce in Malachi 2:10–16,” 76.

⁴⁸ Hill, *DOTP*; Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 73.

with. Like verse 15a, 15b is also difficult to translate. However, the combined interpretation of verse 15a–b would be something like, “and no good one (man of Judah?) forsook or rejected his wife even God's people who are of his spirit.” According Kapahu, “While this understanding is not without its own difficulties, it is at least something coherent to work with plausible correlations.”⁴⁹

Verse 15c: *ûmāhhā 'ehād m^evaqqēš zera' elōhîm* (“And what was the one seeking? Godly offspring”). The LXX has καὶ εἶπατε τίᾱλλο ἢ σπέρμα ζητεῖ ὁ θεός/And I said, “What else does God seek but offspring?” while the Aramaic Targum renders verse 15c thus: “And what was (that) one seeking except that offspring should be established for him from the Lord?” Based on the syntax of the above text, both in the Hebrew and the LXX, it is obvious that the prophet is the one asking the question and also giving the answer. The LXX is slightly different from the MT: *ûmāh* (that is, “And what”) is translated καὶ εἶπατε (meaning: “and I said”) in the LXX. Kapahu mentions that, *ûmāh* when compared with καὶ εἶπατε, indicates an implicit statement versus an explicit one.

The LXX is thus much more overt with its reading of verse 15c. While the MT leaves the reader to infer the identity of the “One,” the LXX and the Targum clearly mention that it is Yahweh himself who seeks offspring. Furthermore, comparing the MT and the LXX shows that the MT version is simply in a stated question and answer format, while the LXX is more of a rhetorical question with the answer already inferred from it. The most important point or issue in the above text is that in all the traditions, “seeking of offspring” is pronounced.⁵⁰

Again, the Hebrew word *ehād* is significant in the text. Though it is not certain who or what the prophet is referring to here, it seems he is still making reference to the “One” (God, Father) as in verse 10, who created and united the first humans (Adam and Eve) to produce offspring in His image with His (God’s) help. The genitive construct of *zera' elōhîm* suggests that the above view is correct. *Zera'* can be translated as “offspring,” “descendants” or “seed.”

The use of *zera' elōhîm* is very significant and can hardly be found anywhere else in the MT (or Hebrew Scriptures). The words appear 11 times in Genesis (1:11, 12, 29; 4:25; 17:7, 8, 9, 19; 21:12; 28:4; 48:11) and do not

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

occur again until here in Malachi. The occurrence of the Hebrew noun *zera'* in Malachi has striking thematic similarities with its use in Genesis (1:11, 12, 29). In these passages, there is the mention of “seed after its own kind.” However, Kapahu observes that in Gen 4:25–26, the words *zera' elōhîm* are reversed as *elōhîm zera'*.⁵¹ In this passage, Yahweh is the one appointing Seth as “seed” of Adam and Eve in place of Abel.

From all indications, it seems obvious that Malachi must have been familiar with the Genesis creation myth. He argues that the purpose of marriage among his people was for the couples to produce godly offspring for Yahweh, who created humanity in His image and likeness. Though humanity became depraved because of the original sin, Yahweh went ahead to select a chosen seed (*zera'*) with whom He had wished to perpetuate the godly generation on earth. Hence, in the patriarchal narratives, in most places where *elōhîm* and *zera'* appear, they are often in reference to Yahweh’s covenant (*berît*) and his selection of a “chosen seed” whom He wished to walk with (cf. Gen 17:7, 8, 9, 19; 21:12; 28:4–5; 48:11–22).

These patriarchal narratives are important in understanding and interpreting Malachi’s thoughts on the essence of marriage among his people. None of the patriarchs divorced the wives of their youth, even in the face of protracted infertility. They were faithful and committed to their wives; hence, Yahweh expected nothing less from the people of Judah during Malachi’s days. They were to learn from their ancestors and be faithful to their own wives.⁵²

Verse 15d: *wenišmaretem berûhākem ûbe'ēšet ne'ûrêka 'al-yibggōd* (“So guard yourselves in your spirit, and you do not deal treacherously with the wife of your youth”). The LXX renders this verse 15d thus: καὶ φυλάξασθε ἐντῷ πνεύματι ὑμῶν καὶ γυναῖκα νεότητός σου μὴ ἐγκαταλίπης/*kai phulaxasthe entō pneumatic hupon kai gunaika neotetos sou mē egkatalipēs* (“So, guard yourselves in your spirit and do not forsake the wife of your youth”). The Targum version says: “So you shall take heed to yourselves and shall not deceive the wife of your youth.”

Based on the above renderings, it is obvious that the MT rendering is similar to the LXX—*w^enish^emar^etem b^erûh^akem* and καὶ φυλάξασθε ἐντῷ

⁵¹ Ibid, 74.

⁵² For more details, see Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*; Glazier-McDonald Beth, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger* (SBLDS 98; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987); Julia M O’Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi* (SBLDS 121; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990).

πνεύματι ὑμῶν are strikingly similar. Kapahu notes that, “Both are sequential conjunctions followed by second person plural reflexive verbs with almost identical meaning; prepositions both used spatially connecting two singular nouns, bearing the same basic meaning, joined to second person plural possessives (one suffixed and one as a pronoun).”⁵³

The meaning of the phrase “guard yourselves in your spirit” is unclear and ambiguous. However, many believe that it may be interpreted in two ways. The prophet is saying that the people concerned should, first, guide and protect their moral character or second, that of their reproductive ability.⁵⁴ However, if we study this phrase in light of verse 15a–b, then, it appears that Malachi was simply entreating his contemporaries to value and protect their marriages since God is the one that made the first couple (Adam and Eve) one via marriage. The next statement, “Do not deal treacherously with the wife of your youth,” shows that the above understanding of the phrase is correct.

As Kaiser⁵⁵ and Isbell⁵⁶ observe, the keyword in the next admonishment of the prophet is the Hebrew verb *bāgad*, meaning “to act treacherously or to be faithless, deceitful.” The verb is possibly derived from the noun *beqed* (garment). The noun *beqed* originally meant the taking of a “garment” but later, it was used to describe other acts that were improper— “cheating, swindling the gullible, defrauding poor or helpless members of society, etc.— all were called *beqeding* or “garmenting.” Perhaps, the contemporary meaning of the above Hebrew parlance “taking of a garment” or “garmenting” may be hypocrisy, deceit and/or covering up of one’s sins. According to the prophet, Judah had broken Yahweh’s laws by marrying a foreigner (the daughter of a heathen deity), as seen in verse 11 and this had led to “breaking faith” with his original partner, the wife of his marriage covenant.

Clearly, the concept of “covenant” is used in the Old Testament for marriage (cf. Gen 31:50; Prov 2:17; Ezek 16:8; Hos 1–2). The above acts of the Judeans were thus seen as profanity before Yahweh, as they had reduced the covenant community to the mundane. Yahweh wanted His people to protect their marriages and not break their covenant relationship with Him by marrying heathen wives. From all indications, this view is in line with the traditional interpretation of the text and though some have argued that the text

⁵³ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 77.

⁵⁴ Beth, *Malachi: The Divine Messenger*.

⁵⁵ Kaiser, “Divorce in Malachi 2:10–16,” 76.

⁵⁶ Charles D. Isbell, *Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 50.

should be interpreted figuratively and not literally, the syntax does not warrant such.⁵⁷

The LXX translation gives credence to the above views. The literary subunits, which are created by the *gunaikaneotetos sou* in verse 15 and in verse 14 (*gunekosneotētos sou*) suggest that the above views based on the Hebrew (MT) text are in order. When the whole literary subunits of verse 15 are joined together, the resulting understanding would be something like, “since you are the people of God, your spirit is of his spirit, so protect it from evil by not forsaking the wife of your youth.”⁵⁸

3c Summary of arguments: God hates unfaithfulness and sending away of one’s wife (v. 16)

Verse 16a: *kî-sāna’ šallah’ āmar y^ehwāh ’elōhay yis^erā’el* (“For the one who hates and divorces, says the Lord, the God of Israel...”).

The LXX reads: *alla ean misēsas exapostilēs legei kurios theostou yisraēl* (“But if you hate her and divorce her says the Lord, the God of Israel...”).

The Targum reads: “But if you hate her, divorce her, says the Lord God of Israel...” while the Latin Vulgate renders it thus: *cum odio habueris dimitte dicit Dominus Deus Israhel* (“For the LORD, the God of Israel, says that he hates putting away”).

There is no doubt that the above text is difficult to translate and over time, many translators and interpreters have wrestled with it to determine its actual meaning. Many have interpreted the text based on the various ancient versions listed above. Many notable English versions adopted the MT rendition of the text (e.g., KJV, AV, The New Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV, NIV, NASB, etc.); while some translations (like the HCSB, ESV, Wycliffe, Coverdale, Geneva Bible etc.) followed the LXX and Targum versions which suggest anti-treachery rather than anti-divorce.

The Wycliffe’s (1390 Version) renders the text thus: “Therefore keep ye your spirit, and never thou despise the wife of thy youth (16a) when thou hatest her...” The NIV and ESV render the phrase thus, “If he hates and divorces [his wife] ...” while the ERV, ASV, RSV, NASB, NRSV and some others render

⁵⁷ Charles C. Torrey, “The Prophecy of Malachi,” *JBL* 17/4–5 (1898); Isaksson Abel, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple: A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19: 13–12 and 1 Cor 11: 3–16* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965); Ahlström W. Gösta, *Joel and the Temple Cult of Jerusalem* (Vetus Testament Supplement 21; Leiden: Brill, 1971).

⁵⁸ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 78.

it, “I hate divorce...” The KJV (1611) translated it as “For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away.” The NETS adopts the reading, “But if, since you hate her, you should divorce her...” Commenting on the differences in the translation of the text, Petterson opines,

The translation of 2:16 in the main text of HCSB, ESV, and NIV (2011) is to be preferred over other translations that say “God hates divorce.” While the Hebrew is difficult, the subject of the verb “hates” more naturally refers to the one who divorces, rather than to God, so: “‘If he hates and divorces his wife,’ says the Lord God of Israel, ‘he covers his garment with injustice’” (HCSB).⁵⁹

As noted above, many have acknowledged that the above text is difficult to translate, especially from the MT. Some scholars, like Collins, posit that some corrections (re-vocalisation, emending the consonants) have been made to the text over the years.⁶⁰ The MT translation starts with the particle *kî* (translated as: for, when, if, that or because, depending on the context), taken in a causal sense, while the LXX version starts with the double conjunction *alla ean* (but if), which is typically a strong adversative conjunction and is taken as conditional. *Alla ean* can also be translated as “but” (but instead), “but still more,” “nevertheless,” “however,” “on the contrary,” etc. *Alla* can also be used to introduce a sentence with keenness and emphasis.⁶¹ According to Mounce, the particle *kî* is a marker that shows relationships between clauses, sentences or sections. It can be used in a logical sense— “for,” “that,” “because”—or it can be used in contrast, “but,” “except”. It can also be used to introduce a statement. Sometimes, it can be left untranslated.

The Hebrew word *śāna*’ is a *Qal* perfect 3rd person masculine singular verb from the Aramaic root *śnš/śn*’, meaning “enemy.” According to Strong’s dictionary, the word can be translated as “to hate (personally), be an enemy, foe, be hateful, odious.” Since the form of *śanê* in this verse is 3rd person masculine singular, then, the translation should be “he hates” not “I hate.” If it were in the 1st person singular, “I hate,” it would be spelled *śānêti* and not *śanê*. However, many English translations have rendered the word in the 1st

⁵⁹ Petterson, “The Book of Malachi in Biblical,” 21.

⁶⁰ Collins, “Malachi 2:16 Again,”

⁶¹ Barbara Roberts, *Malachi 2:16: Ancient Versions and English Translations, and How They Apply to Domestic Abuse*. <https://cryingoutforjustice.blog/2020/10/17/malachi-216-academic-paper-by-barbara-roberts>; William D. Mounce, *Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic).

person singular, “I hate,” based on the assumption that the MT is incomplete or inaccurate.⁶²

Some scholars argue that *šallah* is not to be seen as “the standard *Piel* infinitive but as a rare form of the suffix conjugation which makes way for the above understanding.”⁶³ *Šallah* (with double lamed, l) is the intensive form of the verb *šalah* (single lamed, l), which means “to send, send away, expel, let go free, stretch out” etc. Though the root word *šllh* occurs frequently in the Old Testament (about 847 times), it is not frequently rendered as “divorce” or used in the context of divorce (cf. Deut 22:19, 29; 24:1, 3; Jer 3:1). Thus, according to Roberts,

It is incorrect to render *šallah* in Malachi 2:16 as a simple action verb (he who hates and *divorces*), because a simple action verb would be pointed differently and there is no connecting conjunction (and) in the Hebrew between ‘he hates’ and *šallah*.” There is significance in how *šallah* is spelled and pointed in the Masoretic Text of Malachi 2:16. That exact form (spelling and pointing) of *šallah* occurs only 15 times in the OT. With this form of *šallah*, the translator must decide whether to read it as an imperative, or as a *Vav*-consecutive perfect. The decision rests on the context.⁶⁴

Of those 14 instances, 11 are read as imperative (cf. Exod 4:23; 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7; Eccl 11:1; Jer 15:1), while the other three are read as infinitive construct (cf. Gen 8:10; Exod 8:29; Jer 40:1). Based on the syntax of the text, it is safer to translate *šllh* as an imperative rather than as infinitive construct and if that is the case, then, it should be in the 2nd person. The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) rendering of the word, *šalah* is in consonance with those of the Targum and Latin Vulgate. The DSS renders it thus, “...but if you hate (her), send (her) away...” while the Targum renders it also as imperative: “Because, if you hate her, release her...”

In the light of the above explanations, it is obvious that the agent-subject; that is, the one “hating” is same as the one “divorcing” and likewise “dealing treacherously with the wife of his youth” (v.15). The above claim makes sense because the masculine singular “the wife of *his* youth” flows seamlessly to “he hates” (v.16). And the theme is consistent: “a man who deals treacherously with his wife, hates his wife.” If God becomes the agent-subject,

⁶² Kyle Pope, *He Hates or God Hates Divorce (Malachi 2:16)*. <https://focusmagazine.org/author/kyle>.

⁶³ Kapahu, “Contrasting Canons,” 79.

⁶⁴ Roberts, *Malachi 2:16*, 7–8.

“hating divorce” then “that creates an awkward disjunct with ‘he covers (something) with violence’ in 16b” and of course, God cannot be the one that covers something with violence. Hence, since 1868, at least twenty Hebrew scholars have acknowledged that “he hates...he covers” is the most faithful way to render the Hebrew, with ‘he’ being the divorcing husband.⁶⁵

Based on the construction of the verse 15, especially with the use of the words *šāna*’ (hate) and *šallah* (put away), there is a possibility that the prophet is making allusion to or identifying with the legal process of divorce as stipulated in the Law of Moses (cf. Deut 24:3). Thus, interpreting the verbs *šānê*’ *šallah* as two consecutive actions: “he hated, [and then] he divorced” is in a way correct and reasonable. It is possible that the issue here is not that God hates divorce but that He hates abuse and improper “sending away” of one’s faithful wife. Probably, the men of Judah did not follow the stipulated law of divorce as mentioned in Deuteronomy but “sent away” their wives lightheartedly without giving them the “certificate of divorce.”

D FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative lexical analysis and exegesis of the pericope Mal 2:14–16 show that the text is basically difficult to translate and interpret. However, based on the findings of the study, it is obvious that the text deals with the sins of treachery and unfaithfulness among the people of Judah in Malachi’s day. Infidelity remains one of the major reasons for divorce in contemporary society. The study shows that the issues of unfaithfulness and divorce are not new. The prophet’s stand that marriage is sacred is still relevant today. The point is that one should not divorce simply because he or she falls out of love or because he or she is no longer interested in the partner or marriage. Such an act, as Petterson notes, “is a treacherous and unjust act against one’s spouse.”⁶⁶

Marriage requires faithfulness. In the New Testament, Jesus reiterates God’s original purpose for marriage when he is asked about divorce. He states that divorce without adequate grounds (for “any ground”) is adultery (Matt 19:3). He, however, permits divorce when the marriage vows have been violated (Matt 19:9). Jesus’ teaching is similar to what is obtainable in the Mosaic Law. Unfaithfulness in marriage has continued to cause more harm than good. Many marriages have crashed today because of it. Marriage is a sacred covenant that should be honoured and valued because it has its foundation in creation.

⁶⁵ Roberts, *Malachi 2:16*, 4.

⁶⁶ Petterson, “The Book of Malachi in Biblical,” 22.

The study revealed that the prophet did not focus on women. The whole of the chapter focused on the men of Malachi’s day. God was reminding them to behave themselves and honour their wives. This is also significant. In contemporary society, many marriages have crashed because the men (husbands) are guilty of being violent and abusive. Kroeger is of the view that people should not be forced to remain in abusive marriage relationships. For him, the preservation of marriage is not and should not be taken as the highest good when human life is at stake. “...Divorce is never a desirable option, but is allowed as the least undesirable option in some cases...All of us earnestly desire that troubled marriages should be healed, but if that fails, the option of divorce for the sake of peace should be prayerfully considered.”⁶⁷ Infidelity, physical abuse and/or domestic violence are all dangerous and when they continue, the other partner should not hesitate to walk away for the sake of his or her life.

Finally, the study revealed that the immediate context of the passage under study suggests that the prophet was dealing with a specific case of divorce and thus, the text may not necessarily apply in all cases. When the Law was given through Moses, divorce was permitted as a provision in cases of untenable marriages (Deut 24:1). Moreover, a formal written document was often given. Considering the Hebrew word translated “divorce” (*šallah*), which literally means to “put away,” it seems the people of Judah did not follow what the Deuteronomistic corpus stipulated; rather, they (unlawfully) “sent away” their legally married wives without giving the wives “certificates of divorce.” That may have been what Yahweh was against. The prophet Malachi thus condemned this attitude of the people, who set aside their faithful wives in order to marry the daughters of local landowners for selfish reasons. Such marriages violated the covenant (*berît*) itself (Ezra 9:10–15) and also threatened the continuing faith of Israel. In contemporary society, many divorce cases happen because the wife or husband is no longer finding fulfilment in the union.

E CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the various ancient texts of Mal 2:14–16 in order to understand the prophet’s thoughts concerning marriage as a covenant (*berît*). Though marriage, as has been noted, is supposed to be a life-long affair and much in the Bible is said to safeguard the bonds of this institution, experience has shown that marital infidelity, crisis and divorce are real. The text studied showed that even in Malachi’s day, there were such cases.

⁶⁷ Kroeger, *The Biblical Option of Divorce*, 18.

Based on the outcome of this study, this researcher is thus of the view that since the text under study is a vague and complicated one, it is wrong to use it as a “proof text” to prohibit divorce. The context that produced the text is specific—people divorcing their legally married wives for socio-economic (selfish) reasons. According to Collins, “Strictly speaking, Malachi’s words apply to the specific situation in the restoration community to which he ministered.”⁶⁸ However, this researcher believes that since the structure of Malachi’s argument looks back to the creation account, it offers the modern reader a paradigm for ethical thinking. Moreover, Powers has rightly acknowledged, “marriage is an ordinance of creation, and is God’s gift to all mankind: he made marriage for men and women, and he made men and women for marriage.”⁶⁹ Hence, the creation-based ethics provides a reason for rejecting divorce especially when they are done for selfish purposes.

This researcher thus opines that since marriage is a covenant, married people should do their best to maintain its sacredness. Marriage should not be defined based on emerging trends, understandings, feelings and opinions of post-modern culture but based on what the Bible teaches. Divorce should be discouraged. In fact, based on the researcher’s personal experience, divorce is what he will not even wish for his enemies. It is not always easy to “move on” after a divorce, especially when the marriage has already produced children. All the same, in cases where divorce becomes inevitable, the parties involved should not be seen as unredeemable sinners.

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⁶⁸ Collins, “Malachi 2:16 Again,” 18.

⁶⁹ Ward B. Powers, *Marriage and Divorce: The New Testament Teaching* (Petersham: Jordan Books, 1987), 11.

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