

A Soteriological Interpretation of the Matthean Divorce Exception Clauses¹

Fermin Lopez²

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² B.A. Canberra University, Canberra. LL. B. (Hons) Macquarie University, Sydney. Graduate Diploma in Legal Studies (Merit), Australian National University, Canberra.

In this paper, I put forward a soteriological interpretation for the two “exception clauses” found in Christ’s teaching on divorce in the Gospel of Matthew.³ This interpretation, unlike many other interpretations that have been advanced for these clauses, is fully consistent with Christ’s and the Apostle Paul’s teaching on divorce.

I will argue that both Jesus and the Apostle Paul taught that references to “divorce” in the scriptures, including Old Testament scriptures, means “separation”, not the dissolution of marriage as is often asserted by evangelical theologians,⁴ and that this interpretation is the only way that all the scriptures that reference divorce can be cogently harmonised.

The interpretation builds on the work of a minority of theologians who argue that the word “divorce” in scripture, means “separation”: a temporary discontinuation of married life, not its dissolution. This understanding is based fundamentally on a covenantal view of marriage; a relationship that mirrors the permanent and unbreakable marriage covenant between God and His people described in the Old Testament and evidenced by Christ’s marriage like relationship with the Church (Eph. 5:22-32).

The interpretation is also consistent with the metaphor illustrating God’s dealings with His “adulterous wife” – Israel, as described throughout the Old Testament, but particularly in the prophets.⁵

My thesis is that there is a soteriological reason for the Matthean “exception clauses” which has hitherto been overlooked. The “exception clauses” provide a justification for the temporary separation that God experienced when the Word made flesh (John 1:1-17) was separated from the Father at the crucifixion, and instead of providing a “lawful” reason to terminate marriage, as is often asserted, they in fact reinforce the permanence of the marriage covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) as described in scripture, revealing important truths about God’s plan of salvation for mankind.

³ *“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”* (Matthew 5:32); and *“Now I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman, commits adultery.”* (Matthew 19:9).

⁴ Alex R. G Deasley, *Marriage & Divorce in the Bible and the Church*, 1st ed. (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2000).

⁵ God is not explicitly identified as the “husband” of Israel prior to the prophets. Nevertheless, theologians such as Ortlund Jr. cogently demonstrate that language strongly suggestive of a marriage covenant is used throughout the Old Testament, starting with the book of Genesis. Apart from the explicit reference to humankind being made “male” and “female” in the “likeness” and “image” of God, the clearest marital images from this early part of the Old Testament are framed around Israel’s whoredom and infidelity and God’s jealous response. I believe that the marriage covenant is a metaphor that exemplifies the relationship between the Word and the Father. I agree with theologians who argue that the Word is Wisdom. Moreover, I believe that the Word/Wisdom is the “female” part of God. Like Eve who emanated from a unitary Adam comprising both male and female characteristics, Wisdom emanated from a unitary Deity - God (Proverbs 8:24). It is important to remember that God made “male” and “female” in His likeness (Genesis 1: 26) and image (Genesis 1:27). I believe this means that God, like humankind, is both “male” and “female”, and like humankind, this was not the case in the beginning. This has broader implications for our understanding of the nature of God and his plan for mankind’s salvation. While I discuss some of those implications below, an exploration of the full implications of this truth is outside the scope of this paper.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part I demonstrate that Jesus and the Apostle Paul unambiguously taught the indissolubility of the marriage covenant and that this teaching is fully consistent with Old Testament scripture. The second part of this paper describes the implications that flow from this teaching. In particular, I demonstrate that the “exception clauses” both affirm the indissolubility of the marriage covenant and reveal important truths about God’s plan of salvation for mankind.

Part 1

My objective here is to discuss and interpret the teaching of Jesus on divorce as presented in the Gospels. However, this necessarily will require me to look at how Jesus interprets a number of Old Testament scriptures. In interpreting Jesus’ teachings on this subject, I will also look at how the Apostle Paul interpreted Jesus’ teachings on divorce.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus says: *“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery”* (Luke 16:18).⁶ The first part of the saying affirms that the man who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery (v. 18a). According to Deasley, this statement carries two implications that would have been revolutionary: the first is that marriage is lifelong, and consequently, any “additional” marriage is adulterous. This declaration would have been startling to the Jews of His day, who accepted the dissolution of marriage and widely practiced remarriage.⁷

More startling than the redefinition of marriage would have been the redefinition of adultery, because within Judaism only husbands were seen as victims of adultery. A married man who had the wife of another was deemed to have committed adultery against the husband of the wife he had taken, not against his own wife, whose viewpoint was simply not considered. The formulation of verse 18a makes no mention of the marital status of the “other” woman or even whether she was married at all. The implication is that the victim of the husband’s adultery was his original wife.⁸

The second part of the saying declares *that “the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery”* (v. 18b). The implication here is clear as well; - marriage is lifelong for both partners, hence any man who marries a divorcee becomes guilty of adultery since he is marrying another man’s wife.

In contrast with Luke’s account of the teaching of Jesus on divorce, which is brief, Mark’s account is fuller (Mark 10:2-12). This teaching takes the form of an argument between Jesus and the Pharisees when the latter ask Jesus a test question on divorce. The discussion between Jesus and His disciples is completed when Jesus sums up His teaching privately (vv. 10-12).⁹

⁶ An example of the application of this teaching, taken directly from the New Testament, is when both Matthew and Mark refer to Herodias as *“Philip’s wife,”* even after she had divorced Philip and was married to Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:3, Mark 6:17)

⁷ Ibid Deasley.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

The “law” to which the Pharisees appealed was Deut. 24:1-4.¹⁰ Jesus however clearly rejects their interpretation of the law, instead he points to the Genesis creation narrative to argue for the indissolubility of marriage (Gen. 2:23-24).

According to Jesus, if one wants to know God’s will regarding marriage, it is found in Gen. 2:24 not Deut. 24:1: *“the two will become one flesh”* (Mark 10:7). Jesus interprets scripture to say: *“So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate”* (vv. 8-9).¹¹

Note that Jesus expressly says that man should not *separate* what God has joined together. I believe that this use of language is intentional and highly significant. It provides a strong indication of how the word which is normally translated as “divorce” should be understood within scripture.

The overriding import of the entire passage is to insist that marriage is exclusive, and lifelong. This is not only the point of Jesus’ reference to the creation account but also the irresistible conclusion from His statement to the disciples in verses 11 and 12. No exception is mentioned permitting separation in this passage and it cannot be convincingly argued that any is implied.¹²

According to Deasley, the view that the scriptures quoted by Jesus teach the indissolubility of marriage is based on three premises.¹³ First, the language *“leave his father and mother”* implies a public act, establishing a new family unit. Second, the expression *“be united to his wife”* is covenantal language. Other renderings of the phrase are *“cleave unto his wife”* (KJV), *“clings to his wife”* (NRSV), denoting not only physical unity but loyalty, indeed, loyalty through adversity and trial (Ruth 1:14; 2 Sam. 20:2). Moreover, as the One who, by His creative act divided the one flesh of Adam into male and female, God is the Witness and instigator of this marriage covenant.

Third, the result of this covenant is that the divided pairing is meant to become *“one flesh”* anew. As Laney notes: “The concept of one flesh seems to imply that the marriage bond is indissoluble.”¹⁴ Heth goes further, not only showing that the marriage bond shouldn’t be broken but that it cannot be broken, at least by man. Heth shows that the Levitical laws of relationship give marriage the same binding character as blood. Because blood relationships cannot be undone, the marriage covenant cannot be undone either.¹⁵ Support for this view can also be found directly from the scriptures. For example, in Gen. 2:23 where Adam, speaking of his marriage partner Eve, observes: *“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.”*

¹⁰ According to Daube, this law however, did not approve or institute divorce but was instead designed solely to limit and restrict it. D. Daube, “Repudium in Deuteronomy,” in E. Earle Ellis, Max E Wilcox and Matthew Black, *Neotestamentica Et Semitica*, 1st ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969).

¹¹ Ibid Deasley.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Carl J. Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1981).

¹⁵ W. A. Heth, and G. J. Wenham. *Jesus and Divorce*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985).

This leads us to the two “exception clauses” in the Gospel of Matthew. Since the teaching on divorce in Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:2-12 make no mention of the possibility of divorce or separation at all, it follows that the chief evidence that Jesus taught that divorce was “lawful” must rest on those two passages.

From the time of the Protestant Reformation¹⁶ a view arose that the “exception clauses” could be interpreted to permit the dissolution of marriage and thus lawful remarriage. This view seems to be based primarily on interpreting the word “divorce” in the “exception clauses”, as the Jews had done when interpreting Moses - as a “permanent sending away”, thus in effect dissolving the marriage covenant and permitting remarriage, in cases of sexual immorality.¹⁷ I believe that interpreting the word “divorce” this way is inconsistent with what Jesus said in Luke 16:18 and Mark 10:2-12. In latter chapters I will demonstrate that this interpretation is also inconsistent with the Apostle Paul’s clear teaching and with Old Testament scripture.¹⁸

To begin with, it is important to note that the word “divorce” can equally mean “separation”. Deasley, summarising the views of a number of theologians, gives four reasons for this.¹⁹ First, the word translated “divorces” in the passages that include the “exception clauses” (Greek: *apoluein*), which is translated literally as “*puts away*” in the King James Version, clearly denotes separation rather than the dissolution of the marriage *per se*.

Second, the grammar of Matt. 19:9 speaks against the view that divorce means a *permanent* “putting away” resulting, in effect, in the dissolution of the marriage covenant with the right of remarriage. As Deasley notes, it is significant that the verse does not read: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, except for sexual immorality, commits adultery”, implying that remarriage is permissible following divorce on the single ground of sexual immorality or indecency.²⁰

¹⁶ The so called Erasmian view since it was first propounded in 1519 by Erasmus of Rotterdam from who it was derived by Luther and other Protestants. They came up with the novel idea that because the Old Testament law prescribed the death penalty for adultery, as well as the fact that it was always permissible to remarry on the death of a spouse, the Church should regard the “adulterous” spouse as legally “dead” and thereby allow their spouse to remarry. Perversely, Luther also suggested that the ban on remarriage after separation was inherently suspect simply because the Catholic Church supported it! Interestingly, although the Lutherans accepted this new interpretation, the Anglicans did not. Indeed, it is only recently that some Anglican communions have begun to permit remarriage in certain circumstances. However, this Erasmian interpretation was not accepted by the Early Church. For example, according to the Shepard of Hermas, the husband has an absolute duty to forgive and take back a wife who has been unfaithful in the very worst way – the text seems to imply that the wife has become a prostitute – so long as she repents. The Early Church, up until the 16th century, accepted this interpretation of Matthew 5:32. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church has never departed from the interpretation of the Early Church and the Apostolic Fathers on divorce – they continue to assert to this day that a “legitimate” marriage is indissoluble.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, many theologians have focussed their attention on the meaning of the word “porneia” rather than the meaning of the word “divorce”. I believe that this focus is fundamentally misguided and misses the point that Jesus is making.

¹⁸ The fundamental principle of scriptural interpretation is that scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. Ambiguous passages ought to be compared with clear passages that speak on the same subject. When applying this approach, exegetes should take into consideration the emphatic prohibition against remarriage found in Mark 19:11, Luke 16:17-18, Romans 7:1-3, and 1 Corinthians 7: 10-11, 39.

¹⁹ Ibid Deasley.

²⁰ By this I mean any form of “indecency” (Greek: *porneia*) that “exposes one’s nakedness”

Instead, the verse reads: *“Whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another commits adultery.”* What Jesus is saying here is that separation is only permissible where there is indecency, otherwise it is not permissible, and separation does not allow either party to re-partner or remarry as the marriage covenant is still intact.²¹

This is certainly the case in Matt. 5:32, which implies two things. First, remarriage by the wife following separation is adulterous (v. 32b). Second, even temporary separation enforced by the husband on the wife, for any other reason than his wife’s indecency, is adulterous. Presumably because it leads to the wife’s remarriage or re-partnering (v. 32a). Significantly, there is no mention of the husband’s freedom to remarry or re-partner, even if the wife is indecent.²²

The purpose of the scripture appears to be specifically designed to address in what circumstances a temporary separation enforced by the husband does not involve him in adultery. What Jesus is saying, is that the only ground for temporary separation is indecency.²³

While temporary separation, because of indecency is permissible because of mankind’s “hardness of heart”, the marriage covenant nevertheless remains intact; that is why neither the wife nor the husband can re-partner without committing adultery. Essentially these same things are repeated in Matt. 19:9, albeit in an abbreviated form.

Thus, the “exception clauses” express an exception, not to the principle that whoever puts away his wife and marries another commits adultery, but rather to the principle that a man should not separate from his wife. Dr Wenham maintains with some force that this is not only a possible meaning of the Greek text but its natural meaning.²⁴

A third reason in favour for this interpretation of the “exception clauses” is the context in which they stand. This is particularly the case in Matt. 19:9 where the context is quite comprehensive.

As Deasley cogently argues, the question posed by the Pharisees is sharply defining: *“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”* (Matt. 19:3); and the thrust of Jesus’ reply is similar: *“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate”* (Matt. 19:6). The attempt to deflect this response by appealing to the alleged Mosaic “permission” for divorce is neutralised by Jesus’ pronouncement in verse 6 which makes clear that the general rule is that man must not separate couples joined together in the covenant bond of marriage.²⁵

The general drift of the debate, therefore, far from leading one to expect concessions, encourages the opposite. This appears to be confirmed by the response of the disciples: *“If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry”* (Matt. 19:10). If Jesus was simply opting for either of the views, then prevailing in Judaism - the Shammaite or Hillelite options or some variation on them – then the response of the disciples is very difficult to understand. In essence, they would have been declaring their inability to do what the followers of Shammai (to refer to the sterner option) did, namely, resort to divorce and remarriage only in cases of a wife’s indecency.

²¹ Ibid Deasley.

²² Ibid Deasley.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ W. A. Heth, and G. J. Wenham. *Jesus and Divorce*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985).

²⁵ Ibid Deasley.

If, on the other hand, Jesus is instead teaching that marriage is indissoluble and a temporary separation is permissible only in the case of indecency and then with no right to end the marriage and thereby allow the possibility of remarriage, the disciples' misgivings are fully understandable.²⁶

Jesus taught that the paramount issue was not that divorce or separation should be done for the right reason or in the right way. The paramount question was whether it should be done at all.²⁷

In other words, Jesus teaches that the marriage covenant should never be broken by man.²⁸ Jesus made this point by quoting from two parts of the creation narrative in Genesis: - "*At the beginning the 'Creator made them male and female,' and 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'*" (Matt. 19:4-5). The first part of the quotation comes from Genesis 1:27, the second from Genesis 2:24. As previously mentioned, it is very important to note that Jesus expressly taught that "*man should not **separate** what God has joined together*" (Matt. 19:6).

A fourth reason in favour of this view is that this was the interpretation held by the Early Church.²⁹ In this regard, it is important to note that these early Christian writers had a "built-in cultural, social, and linguistic grid that served them in their reading and interpretation of the Gospels – and Matthew's was the most popular in the Early Church."³⁰

I argue, that like Jesus, the Apostle Paul unambiguously teaches that married Christians should not separate. Paul teaches that if an *unbelieving* spouse wishes to separate, then the Christian partner should not prevent that separation (1 Cor. 7:15). Under that circumstance, Christians are not "*bound*", that is, they are not required to impede or resist the separation, instead they are "*called to peace*" with everyone, including their separated spouses, in the hope of an eventual reconciliation (1 Cor. 7:15-16). It is significant that while permitting a separation brought about by an *unbeliever*, nothing is said in the entire passage about the dissolution of the marriage covenant or the possibility of remarriage for either spouse.

Paul like Jesus, teaches that Christian spouses should not initiate separation, but if they do, they must remain celibate or else be reconciled (1 Cor. 7:10-11). In this regard, Paul is simply following Christ's express teaching. Significantly, Paul in his writings explicitly uses the word – "*separation*" rather than "*divorce*", thus removing any potential ambiguity about what is intended. In doing so, Paul is fulfilling his apostolic mission to confirm Christ's teaching that "*man should not **separate** what God has joined together.*" (Matt. 19:6)³¹

²⁶ Significantly, instead of consoling His disciples by reminding them of any "exceptions" which would allow them to remarry, Jesus instead addresses their shock and disbelief at His teaching, by telling them that in such circumstances His disciples will need to become "*eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven*" (Matthew 19:10-12).

²⁷ Ibid Deasley.

²⁸ The marriage covenant is however, dissolved by the death of either spouse (Romans 7:1-3).

²⁹ H. W. House, ed. *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990).

³⁰ Ibid Deasley.

³¹ Surprisingly, while accepting that the arguments for this interpretation are compelling, especially when taken together, Deasley goes on to reject this interpretation. The reason Deasley gives for this is that, according to him, Paul pragmatically allows the dissolution of marriage and remarriage. However, the evidence Deasley provides for this is not compelling. Indeed, Deasley suggests that there is an inconsistency between Christ's teaching on this issue and the Apostle Paul. Deasley seems relaxed about this and problematically

This interpretation is further strengthened by the fact that Paul has already absolutely prohibited remarriage in the case of separation (1 Corinthians 7:10-11).

It is important to note that wherever Paul specifically mentions the possibility of remarriage, he notes explicitly that one of the spouses has died. (1 Cor. 7:39 and Romans 7:2-3). Indeed, Paul expressly refers to a woman who lives with another man while her husband is alive as an *“adulteress”*. (Romans 7:2-3).³²

Jesus' and Paul's commands on divorce and remarriage flew in the face of orthodox Jewish teaching based on their understanding of the Old Testament Law. This is the reason why Jesus' teachings on divorce and remarriage met with such strong reactions from the custodians of Jewish orthodoxy at that time; even among his closest disciples (Matt. 19:10) however, as we shall see, Jesus' teaching is fully consistent with Old Testament scripture itself.

Given that even Jesus received such a reaction, it is not surprising that His teaching on separation and remarriage is still largely rejected by society in general, as well as by a significant number of theologians.

Part 2

As previously stated, my thesis is that there is a soteriological reason for the so called Matthean *“exception clauses”* which is consistent with all scripture, but which has hitherto been overlooked.

According to Christ, Moses permitted separation because of *“man's hard heartedness”* on the grounds that the wife had acted indecently towards her husband. The Hebrew expression (*‘erwat dabar’*) used in Deut. 24:1 literally means: *“the nakedness of a thing”*.³³

I believe that the *“exception clauses”* provide a justification for the temporary separation that God experienced when the Word made flesh was separated from the Father when the Word assumed mankind's spiritual *“nakedness”* at the crucifixion.

However, according to Jesus, even temporary separation for this cause was not part of God's plan or original intention (Gen. 2:16-17). God never purposed that humankind would lose their spiritual innocence and thus be confronted by the fact that they were *“naked”* (Gen. 3:10-11).³⁴

suggests that Paul's alleged pragmatic approach to remarriage is to be preferred to Jesus' teaching! Perplexingly, Deasley appears to completely ignore that Paul's teaching can easily be harmonised with Christ's teaching by accepting that the word *“divorce”* means *“a temporary separation”*.

³² Deasley states that *“it is remarkable that both in summarising Jesus' teaching as well as in applying it, Paul does not use the language of adultery to describe the consequences of breaking the Lord's command even though it is used in the divorce sayings of all three Gospels.”* This is not correct, for example, in Romans 3:2-3 Paul expressly refers to a woman who lives with another man while her husband is alive as an *“adulteress”*.

³³ The Hebrew expression (*‘erwat dabar’*) used in Deuteronomy 24:1 means literally *“the nakedness of a thing.”* This expression denotes serious indecent behaviour. It has been variously translated as *“some uncleanness”* (KJV), *“some indecency”* (RSV), *“something indecent”* (NIV), *“something offensive”* (REB).

³⁴ Indeed, before their loss of spiritual innocence, both Adam and Eve although spiritually *“naked”*, were not ashamed of their *“nakedness”* (Genesis 2:25). It is only when they lose their spiritual innocence and thus become *“hard of heart”* that they feel ashamed of their *“nakedness”* and *“separate”* by attempting to hide themselves from God (Genesis 2:16; Genesis 3:7-24). A detailed discussion on this interpretation is outside the scope of this paper, however I intend to write a separate paper fully setting out my thesis on this shortly.

That is why Jesus in responding to the Pharisees says: *“He said to them, ‘because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so”* (Matt. 19:7-8).

Because a procedure for separation was incorporated into the text in Deut. 24:1-4, some Jews and others concluded that separation and even the dissolution of the marriage covenant was acceptable to God.

However, Jesus’ response to their questions about the lawfulness of “divorce” makes it absolutely clear that while Moses permitted separation, because of *“indecenty”* and mankind’s *“hardness of heart”*, separation is only permissible for a period of time until the shaming presence of the indecenty is *“covered”* and mankind’s heart is *“softened”*.³⁵

This is clearly exemplified in the Old Testament. According to the prophet Isaiah, God was Israel's husband (Isa. 54:5), who took her to be his own and vowed to feed, clothe, cherish, and be faithful to her (Ezek. 16). In stark contrast to God's faithfulness and care, Israel shamelessly disregarded the marriage covenant: neglecting, abusing and betraying him. The prophets repeatedly called Israel's behaviour adulterous and indecent (Ezek. 23:37, Jer. 5:7). Indeed, the prophet Jeremiah expressly says, *“for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.”* (Jer. 3:8).

It is important to note that this “divorce” however did not nullify God’s marriage covenant with Israel. Even after God declared Himself *“divorced”* in Jeremiah 3:8 He nonetheless says a few verses later, *“I am your husband”* (Jer. 3:14). These Old Testament scriptures bear witness to the fact that when God *“divorced”* Israel He simply sent her away and separated Himself from her for a time because of her indecenty. This was clearly in accordance with what Moses had prescribed in Deut. 24:1-4.

Discussing this “divorce” the prophet Isaiah says:

“For your Maker is your husband— the LORD Almighty is his name— the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit— a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God. ‘For a brief moment, I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger, I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,’ says the LORD your Redeemer. ‘To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you.” (Isa. 54:5-10).

³⁵ God personally dealt with the consequences of humankind’s loss of spiritual innocence which exposed our “nakedness” (Genesis 3:10-11) and provided access to a “softened heart” (Ezekiel 36:26), through His atoning sacrifice at His Crucifixion.

This Old Testament metaphor parallels exactly the temporary separation that occurred between the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14) and the Father when Jesus bore our “nakedness” and indecency in His own body at His crucifixion.

It is also strongly inferred in that part of the creation narrative that describes the separation that occurred between mankind and God following the exposing of mankind’s “nakedness” as a consequence of the loss of mankind’s spiritual innocence (Gen. 3:10-11).

In Matthew 27:45-46, it says: *“Now from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’”* If Jesus is God, and He is, why would He say this?

First of all, Jesus quoted Psalm 22 which begins with, *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”* Jesus quoted this Psalm to draw attention to it and to the fact that He was fulfilling it there on the cross (Ps. 22:11-18).

The Apostle Paul referring to Jesus’ atoning sacrifice says, *“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him”* (2 Cor. 5:21).

On the cross Jesus took on our “nakedness”. Jesus who knew no sin became sin. This caused an automatic *separation* between God the Word made flesh³⁶ and God the Father.

³⁶A separation of God’s own “marriage” relationship. I believe that the Word referred to in John 1 is Wisdom - the “female” part of God. In the Old Testament, Wisdom is often celebrated, and most lavishly in Proverbs 1-9. Wisdom is there personified in female form. She is praised in exalted terms: *“all the things you may desire cannot compare with Her”* (Proverbs 3:15), *for “She is a tree of life”* (Proverbs 3:18), and *“Her fruit is better than gold”* (Proverbs 8:19). Wisdom cries out in the streets, especially encouraging the “simple” and “scoffers” to gain deeper understanding (Proverbs 1:20-23; Proverbs 8:1-6). Nonetheless, most people reject Her (Proverbs 1:24-27). Wisdom is given an integral role in the creation process: *“I have been established from everlasting,”* She sings, *“from the beginning, before there was ever an earth”* (Proverbs 8:23). When God created, *“I was beside Him as a master craftsman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before Him”* (Proverbs 8:30). This Wisdom imagery expands in later Hebrew literature, most of it now found in the Apocrypha. Since Protestants have not accepted these writings as canonical, they are often unaware of how great an impact some of it had on the New Testament. But notice the apocryphal book Wisdom, which declares that Sophia *“pervades and penetrates all things. / For She is a breath of the power of God, / a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. ... / a reflection of eternal light, / a spotless mirror of the working of God, / And an image of His goodness”* (Wisdom 7:25-26). Now compare this with Hebrews 1:3, which calls Jesus, the Word made flesh, *“the brightness of His glory / and the express image of His person, / and upholding all things through the Word of His power.”* Almost all biblical scholars agree that in formulating this description, the writer of Hebrews was significantly influenced by the former passage. Hebrew Wisdom imagery also helped shape the Apostle John’s concept of Christ as the Word (logos). Like Wisdom, the Word was with God from the beginning (John 1:1-2; Proverbs 8:22-23; Wisdom 6:22; Sirach 24:9). Both manifest God’s glory (John 1:14; Wisdom 7:25) and bestow light and life (John 1:4-5, 9; Wisdom 7:26; Proverbs 3:18). Like Wisdom, the Word descended from heaven to bestow God’s truth (John 1:14, 17-18; Sirach 24:8-11; Baruch 3:37; Wisdom 9:9-10), but was not generally received (John 1:11; Proverbs 1:24-27; 1 Enoch 42). These themes appear not only in John’s prologue (John 1:1-18), but also throughout his gospel. Wisdom imagery also lies behind Colossians 1:15-17. This text, Hebrews 1:2-3, and John 1:1-18 are probably the three most extensive New Testament affirmations of Christ’s deity. Many evangelical commentaries illuminate these passages’ indebtedness to Wisdom terminology (see, for instance, the relevant volumes in the “New International Commentary on the New Testament” [Eerdmans] and the “Word Biblical Commentary”).

It says in Hab. 1:13 that God is too pure to look upon evil. *"And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you: God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all"* (1 John 1:5).

Therefore, when Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Pet. 2:24), the Father, and the Word became spiritually separated.

The separation that the Word made flesh and the Father experienced however, was brought about because of our *"nakedness"* and our *"hardness of heart"* (Gen. 3:10-11) which Jesus assumed and rectified in His own body for our salvation.³⁷

This separation however, did not dissolve God's unbreakable marriage covenant with His people. The separation was temporary in nature - until the cause of the indecency and the hardness of heart were removed. Both were removed through the death, resurrection and glorification of the Word made flesh.

Moreover, most participants in the Christological controversies of the early Christian centuries, which formed the classical confessions of Christ's deity, understood Wisdom in Proverbs 8 to refer to Christ. Pelikan, maintains that in this process "the basis for the fullest statement of ... the divine in Christ as Logos was provided not by ... John 1:1-14 but by Proverbs 8:22-31." Jesus himself alludes to this link in Luke 7:33-35: *"For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by all her children."* If Sophia/Wisdom imagery occurs in such basic texts, it should not surprise us to find it elsewhere. The Apostle Paul, in fact, calls Christ "the Wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians. 1:24; cf. 1:30). The Apostle Matthew seems to indicate that Jesus regarded himself as Wisdom. Consider, for example, Jesus' well-known words "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). This seems similar to Sophia's call in Sirach 51:26-27: *"Draw near to me, you who are untaught ... why are your souls very thirsty? ... Put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction. ... See with your eyes that I have laboured little and have found for myself much rest."* Moreover, Luke reports that the "Wisdom of God" said, *"I will send them prophets and apostles ... "* (Luke 11:49); yet, in the parallel passage in Matthew, Jesus himself says, *"I will send you prophets ... "* (Matthew 23:34). Further discussion of the linkage between the Word and Wisdom is outside the scope of this paper however I intend to write a separate paper fully setting out my thesis on this shortly.

³⁷ *"Thus, says the LORD, 'Where is the certificate of divorce by which I have sent your mother away? Or to whom of My creditors did I sell you? Behold, you were sold for your iniquities, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away'".* (Isaiah 50:1)

The reconciliation between the Word and the Father evidenced by the resurrection not only confirms God's promise that His marriage covenant with His people, now incorporated within the resurrected Word's body, is unbreakable and everlasting, but more importantly, prepares the groundwork for God's ultimate plan for mankind's salvation³⁸ through the consummation of that marriage covenant.³⁹

³⁸ In summary, I see the process as follows: God the Spirit although one in the beginning, divides into two and together They bring about the creation; one half of God - the Word becomes flesh; the Word takes on humankind's nakedness and thus temporarily separates from the Father at the crucifixion; the Word made flesh is transformed through the resurrection into a spiritual body and is glorified, the Father reunites with the Word, now incorporating the Church, to become one Spirit once again. Further discussion of this process is outside the scope of this paper however I intend to write a separate paper fully setting out my thesis on this shortly.

³⁹ The Old Testament expectation of consummation of the marriage of God with His people, is taught directly by Christ Himself (Matthew 9:14-15, Mark 2:18-20; Luke 5:33-35). John the Baptist confirms His testimony (Jn. 3:28-30). Jesus' teaching of His generation as adulterous and of Himself as the bridegroom illustrates the present tension and the approaching spiritual consummation of God's marriage covenant with His people. This imagery is continued by the Apostle James (James 4:4). For James, covenant faithfulness is a deeply felt personal preference for the favour of God, at whatever the social cost.

The spiritual adultery referred to by James consists in the lingering wish to retain the world's favour even as one also wishes to enjoy the benefits of redemption. Such hypocrisy provokes God to jealousy, as James goes on to explain in verse 5. This marriage covenant though, is with Christ's transformed spiritual body - the Word made flesh but then transformed into a spirit body and glorified, not directly with humankind (1 Corinthians 6:15-17; 2 Corinthians 11:1-3). The consummation of this marriage leads not to "one flesh" but "one spirit" (1 Corinthians 15). This spiritual body - God's Bride, will incorporate all the redeemed people of God. The "cleaving to the Lord" of Deuteronomy 10:20 is realised through the joining of Christ's spiritual body - the Church, to the Bridegroom - Yahweh at the end of time. The Apostle John strongly alludes to this spiritual consummation of marriage in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 19:6-9). The Bride is symbolised by the holy city, the new Jerusalem descending from heaven. The city which had become a harlot, filled with violence (Isaiah 1:21), is replaced with the perfect dwelling of God with His people in holy communion - the ultimate human experience and the end toward which salvation history has been pressing from the time humankind lost its spiritual innocence in the Garden of Eden. This inner meaning for the city of God is made explicit in verse 3, bringing to realization the promise implicit in the Old Testament tabernacle and the temple. Verse 2b conveys much the same idea but with the image of the bride, implying the intimacy of the divine/divine-human communion (Isaiah 62:5b). The fact that the city-bride comes from heaven guarantees her purity, which the word "prepared" itself suggests. But it also shows that the Bride's origin is divine - the Word made flesh. This perfect union brings together the triumphant Lamb and a pure bride beyond the reach of sin. The Lamb has sanctified His bride, cleansed her and presented her to Himself in splendour, holy and without blemish (c.f. Ephesians 5:26-27). For a fuller description see: Ortlund Jr.

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