CHAPTER FOUR

MALACHI 2:10-16 AND THE TOLERATION OF POLYGYNY ELSEWHERE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

We turn now to consider the primary argument of C. C. Torrey against the traditional interpretation of Mal. 2:10-16, which finds in this text a condemnation of literal interfaith marriage and divorce. Writes Torrey, "To assume, in the first place, that divorce of Israeliitish wives stood in any necessary or even probable connection with the wedding of women from other nations is ridiculous. Jews occasionally married gentiles, not because they were dissatisfied with their own countrywomen, or with their religion, but because they found some of the gentile women attractive." More recently, A. Isaksson has argued in similar terms, "it could not have been necessary for a Jew at this period to divorce his Jewish wife in order to marry a woman belonging to another people and another religion...." What is at issue in these observations is the apparent implication of Mal. 2:10-16 that polygyny, in spite of its assumed toleration elsewhere in the Old Testament, was no longer an option for Malachi’s contemporaries. It is important to realize that this rejection of polygyny, if it is so, was the conviction not only of the prophet, who may have held an idiosyncratic view, but also apparently of the very men Malachi was condemning. The divorce of their Jewish wives was seemingly a necessary prelude to (or a consequence of) the mixed marriages into which these men had entered.

We have already rejected the alternative interpretation which Torrey and Isaksson propose for Mal. 2:10-16, an interpretation which avoids the alleged difficulty by arguing for a figurative reference in the text. It remains for the present chapter to support a reference to literal marriage and divorce by attempting to resolve this apparent contradiction between Mal. 2:10-16 and the assumed toleration of polygyny elsewhere in the Old Testament. Among scholars who support a reference to literal marriage in Malachi, there are five main alternative approaches to resolve this apparent contradiction, each of which we shall consider in turn:

1) Mal. 2:10-16 originally condemned only divorce and therefore carries no implication regarding the practice of polygyny (the majority view among modern critical scholars).

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1 "The Prophecy of ‘Malachi’," 9.
2) Mal. 2:10-16 originally condemned only mixed marriage and therefore is not only consistent with the practice of polygyny, but presupposes it (A. S. van der Woude).

3) Mal. 2:10-16 condemns both mixed marriage and divorce in a manner which suggests that these were typically interrelated acts. The divorces in question, however, refer to Ezra’s enforced dissolution of mixed marriages in Ezra 9-10, and so the text carries no implication regarding the practice of polygyny (G. H. A. von Ewald, H. H. Spoer, L. Kruse-Blinkenberg, J. J. Collins, and M. Smith).

4) Mal. 2:10-16 condemns both mixed marriage and divorce, but these offences bear no necessary causal relationship to each other. Accordingly, once again, the text carries no particular implication regarding the practice of polygyny (J. Wellhausen and others — perhaps the most convincing view).

5) Mal. 2:10-16 condemns both mixed marriage and divorce in a manner which suggests that these were typically interrelated, with the implication that resort to polygyny under such a circumstance was exceptional, discountenanced, or possibly even illegal in Malachi’s day (the traditional view).

Since this traditional view remains possible, it will be necessary to digress in order to examine the widely assumed toleration of polygyny elsewhere in the Old Testament and particularly in the post-exilic period. From this examination it will be concluded that although polygyny was never illegal, monogamy was seen as the marital ideal, particularly in the post-exilic period, and that actual marital practice was monogamous with few exceptions. As a consequence, there is no compelling reason for denying a reference to literal marriage and divorce in Malachi 2 or, more particularly, for denying the identification of literal marriage as a “covenant” in 2:14.

1. MALACHI 2:10-16 ORIGINALLY CONDEMNED ONLY DIVORCE AND THEREFORE CARRIES NO IMPLICATION REGARDING THE PRACTICE OF POLYGYNY (THE MAJORITY CRITICAL VIEW)

Supposing a rejection of polygyny to have been unlikely in post-exilic times, perhaps the majority of modern critical scholars have resolved the seeming rejection of polygyny in Malachi’s day by their conclusion that Mal. 2:11f. is unoriginal to the text.\(^3\) In other words, according to this approach, Malachi originally attacked only the practice of divorce, not mixed marriage.

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There are minor differences among scholars as to whether to include vss. 10, 11a, or 13a in the proposed interpolation. So, e.g., R. Vuilleumier considers only 11b-12 to be