

Malachi 2:15
Destroying God's Work
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Introduction

I want to start this morning by asking a question. How many of you have been challenged by unbelievers about the reliability of the Scriptures. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard a saying similar to this, "If the Bible is so accurate and reliable, why are there are so many translations, and why do they disagree with each other." Have you ever heard this question/critique? Well... when we look at Malachi 2:15 you will see exactly why such a question is viable. To ask such a question out of a spirit of rebellion against God certainly is sinful; however, we must understand that that is a valid question for unbelievers to ask (how can you tell me to put all of my trust and hope in this book that is translated in so many different ways—how can I trust its reliability). Take a look with me at Malachi 2:15; I am going to read to you 5 different versions of this same passage.

ESV: Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

NASB: But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed them to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth.

HCSB: Didn't the one God make us with a remnant of His life-breath? And what does the One seek? A godly offspring. So watch yourselves carefully, and do not act treacherously against the wife of your youth.

NIV: Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and Spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

NKJV: But did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth.

They are almost all completely different from one another aren't they! I have been studying the book of Malachi for about the last 3 years or so, have read it well over 100 times in full, and have been studying Malachi 2:10-16 profusely for over a month now and this passage still puzzles me. The interesting thing about this passage is that each of these translations are grammatically valid. But notice the large difference especially between how it is rendered in the ESV and the NASB. If I were to preach a sermon on Malachi 2:15 from the ESV this week and then next week preach the same verse from the

NASB it would be a completely different message, with a completely different theme and point.

Are the unbelieving critics right? I mean, just look at Malachi 2:15, their concerns are valid. The translations do differ and not just “sort of,” and Malachi 2:15 is not the only passage in the Bible that can be translated in such divergent ways. I have been asked this question and I really believe that there is a good answer to this question. Can we trust the Bible in light of the great variance in translation? Why are there so many translations and why do they differ? The reason why there are so many translations and the reason why the translators differ from each other so much is because *they are translating from one language to another*. Folks, this is not rocket science. This is just par for the course in the task of translation.

The fact is that each and every language is different. Each and every language has unique conventions that other languages do not have (for example the lack of tense in Hebrew, and type of action in Greek). Each and every language has certain words that other languages do not have (for example *hesed*—carries something of the idea of lovingkindness or covenant faithfulness—in Hebrew and *parakletos*—carries something of the idea of advocate, helper, counselor, one called alongside to declare and especially in a legal setting—in Greek), and lack words that other languages do have. For example, let’s say that you moved to Italy, learned the Italian language, and then decided that you wanted 10 of your fellow bilingual friends to translate a series of magazines, newspapers, short stories, poems, and other literary documents into English (that combined equaled the length of the Bible) just to see what would happen. So, all ten of you set out to translate these documents into English simultaneously on your own without seeking to help each other. What would be the result? I can tell you what the result would be: 10 translations that communicated the same basic ideas and main themes while comprising huge variance and divergence. There would be just as much variance and divergence in these 10 translations as there would be in the different translations of Scripture. This is just the reality of translating from one language to another.

Let me set forth for you an example. Imagine that in this composition of different documents there was an article from a magazine helping pregnant women deal with the different cravings that they have. In this article a women tells of how when she pregnant she had a huge craving for Peanut Butter. She then tells a humorous story about how one morning she woke up at 3:00 am with a huge craving peanut butter, went into the kitchen to get some peanut butter to find that they had none. She then tells of how she, at 3 am, “ran to the store” to get some peanut butter because the craving was so bad. How would these 10 translators (translating from Italian to English) translate this phrase “I ran to the store”? Just look at the possibilities: (1) “I ran to the store” (one translator could have translated it word for word); (2) “I flew to the store” (one translator may have tried to use a common day English figure of speech to communicate the fact that the craving caused her to get the store as quickly as possible.); (3) “I drove to the store” (one translator may try to undo the figure of speech communicated in the Italian language to be technically accurate); (4) “I dashed to the store” (one translator may try to communicate the urgency of getting to the store because of the craving); (5) “I bolted to the store” (communicates the same idea as ‘dashed’ but with a synonymous word). (6) “I urgently drove to the store” (here we see that the translator adds a word, urgently, that isn’t in the original article and yet gets across the central idea).

To turn the table around, imagine if you were to translate from English to Italian. For example, you want to translate an article written by an apple farmer who is talking about the secrets of growing big, fat, juicy apples. In this article he says, “Trust me, the apples in my orchard are *as big as Texas*.” How are you going to translate this common phrase into the Italian language? You probably aren’t going to translate it word for word because this is a common figure of speech in America. In your translation you are probably going to help them get the basic idea of “as big as Texas” by either translating it as “the apples in my orchard are really really really big,” or “the apples in my orchard are as big as your head,” or “the apples in my orchard are as big the Sistine Chapel.”

On top of this we have to deal with what is called translation philosophies. There are three predominate translation philosophies: Formal Equivalence, Dynamic/Functional Equivalence, and Optimal Equivalence. Formal Equivalence is a word for word translation which seeks accuracy to the form and structure of the original language. Formal equivalence has an eye on detail and accuracy and less on readability. The NASB, ESV, NKJV, NRSV, RSV, and KJV are products of this philosophy. Dynamic/Functional Equivalence is a thought for thought translation which seeks to communicate the thoughts of Scripture without as much of an eye for accuracy in detail. They seek accuracy in thought, not detail. The NIV, NLT, CEV, The Good News Bible, are products of this philosophy.

Optimal Equivalence is what I would call a “common sense translation.” In other words, those who follow this philosophy do not conform their translation to either of the other 2 translation approaches; rather they let common sense determine how they translate. They try to be as accurate and word for word as possible, but are not afraid to be thought for thought when word for word obscures the original author’s point. This is a hybrid philosophy that I am partial to. The only translation which is considered to an Optimal Equivalence translation is the HCSB. This actually is my translation of choice because it reads as smooth and easy as the NIV and yet is as accurate as the ESV. This does not mean that the HCSB is the translation of this church. All translations have their strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, every believer ought to have a primary translation. I strongly urge something closer to the accurate side of things. I personally recommend the HCSB. However, the best approach is to have one main translation and yet 3 or 4 sub translations. When I study I always have open 4 Bibles: an HCSB, NASB, ESV, and an NIV.

Why do I say this, because it helps make sense of why there are so many translations that differ from each other so much. Not only do translators have the task of translating from one language to another (which poses problems in and of itself), but they have to make a decision in regard to whether they want to translate word-for-word, thought-for-thought, or some sort of a hybrid.

The interesting thing is that whenever you translate from one language to another you are going to have divergence and variance, and yet only the Scriptures’ accuracy is called into question because of the variance and divergence in its different translations (this may well be because no other book has been translated so profusely, and thus the reality of divergence and variance in translation has only clearly been seen in comparing and contrasting the Scriptures). Why are the Scriptures put to tests that no other documents are subjected to? The world has agenda—not to have a martyrs complex or

anything, but it is true—men hate the light because it exposes their deeds of darkness, and the word of God is the light, it reveals the glory and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Why I prefer the ESV: A Lesson on Context

Back to Malachi 2:15 (that rascal of a passage which diverted me to the long tangent above). I am sure that you are all at this point waiting with baited breath to know which, if any, translation of Malachi 2:15 I prefer. First of all, let it be known that each of the translations which we looked at are certainly viable, feasible. Each of the translations that we looked at are grammatically possible. All of the words used are even translated appropriately. How then do you come to a conclusion of which translation is correct?

This is the thing that makes Malachi 2:15 so unique: each of the translations read above are definitely viable, and yet there Malachi had to only mean 1 thing. The first question that you need to ask when you come to a passage like this is, “What contribution does this verse make the thought-flow/argument of the author? Where is the author heading? What is the purpose of Malachi 2:15: is he building a case, simply telling a fact, laying some sort of a foundation for what is to come?” Ultimately, what we need to do is look to the context. We need to ask ourselves where the author is heading and how Malachi 2:15 gets him there. Once you can establish why the author is saying what he is saying, you will then be able to move forward.

Well, what sort of a context does Malachi 2:15 find itself in? As you might remember the book of Malachi is a word of warning to the Israelites. God is exposing the sin of the Israelites to them in order to get them to urgently pursue repentance and reconciliation with him. Malachi 2:15 finds itself in the third section of this book in which God exposes the faithlessness of the Israelites, and here in this part of this third section God is exposing the Israelites sin of faithlessness to their wives. The climax of this third section actually is found in Malachi 2:15 and 16. Remember what God’s purpose in the book of Malachi is, it is to warn them, to warn them that if they do not repent of their many sins that he is going to judge them. What we see is that this third section climax’s in a warning that is repeated twice.

*¹⁵Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. **So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.** ¹⁶For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. **So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.**”*

This warning is repeated in almost word for word fashion. As I have stated many times before, the way an author emphasized a point in the ancient world was not to italicize or bold it, but rather to repeat it. This is the ultimate point of this third section. God is pleading with the Israelites to repent of their faithlessness toward each other. He says “So guard yourselves in your spirit.” In other words, “Beware!” This conjures up the idea communicated in Malachi 2:1:

*If you will not listen, **if you will not take it to heart** to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, **because you do not lay it to heart.***

The point is that their lack of faithfulness to each other, and specifically their lack of faithfulness to their wives, is bringing the judgment of God upon them. God does not take divorce lightly. God is warning them. This is ultimately where Malachi is heading—he is heading to this warning. From 2:10 all the way up to 2:15 he is ratcheting up, ratcheting up to this exhortation found in 2:15 and 16. This can ultimately be seen by the word “So,” which carries with the idea of “therefore,” or as the NASB puts it, “take heed *then* to your spirit.” In essence what he is saying when he uses the word “So” is “In light of what I have just said you need to be extra careful and fearful in the way that you deal with the wife of your youth. She is not just any ol’ woman, and I will deal with you if you do not repent of your faithlessness. He wants these Israelites to know that if they do not start taking faithfulness seriously that he is going to smite them, punish them, judge them.

This is the context which Malachi 2:15 finds itself in, it is leading up to the repeated warning in 2:15 and 2:16. Thus, I believe that the ultimate reason why Malachi is saying what he is saying here is because he is trying to lay the foundation for the warning given. He is setting the stage for the warning so that the warning might mean something when it is given, so that it might have teeth in it. This is why I prefer to the ESV as opposed to the NASB. Look at the difference between the two:

*ESV: Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. **So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.***

*NASB: But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? **Take heed then** to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth.*

The reason why I prefer the ESV over the NASB is because it seems to flow better in the context. The way the ESV flows with the “So guard yourselves,” “Take heed then,” warning better than does the NASB. The NASB does not ratchet up the urgency of the warning/exhortation given at the end of the verse, it simply states a fact that those who have had a portion of the Spirit did not divorce their wives. Once again, this is highly debatable stuff. However, I really believe that the ESV fits the context much better. Ultimately the first half of vs. 15 really sets the foundation for the urgent warning delivered in the second half of verse 15. The NASB just doesn’t flow as well—the way they translate the first half of vs. 15 does not set a tone of urgency for the warning/exhortation in vs. 16.

Since I prefer the ESV I will explain vs. 15 with it. What then does vs. 15 say?

Malachi 2:15

In vss. 13-14 the Israelites cry out to God because he no longer regards their offerings or responds to their prayers and they in essence slap God with injustice and he responds to their critique of him by saying, in essence, “Of course I haven’t regarded

your offerings or responded to your prayers. Listen up pal, I have been witness between how faithless you have been to the wife of your youth, who is your companion and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of his Spirit in their union?" In other words, what Malachi is getting at here is that God had a hand in making the one flesh union that these men had with their wives. Marriage is not just some sort of a human decision where a man and a woman relate to each other on the basis of the promises that they have made to each other. The one flesh union that exists between a man and a woman is much deeper than physical. A man and a woman are not just one flesh in a physical sense because they become one when they engage in intercourse, like two legos stuck together. No, they are one in a much deeper sense. What we see here is that the one flesh union, is the result of the creative and powerful work of God where he makes one new "man" out of the two—their union goes much deeper than the flesh. And the most profound thing about the one flesh union is that it is an act of God—God is the one who in essence soldered them together, uniting them in both body and spirit. And this is ultimately the point that Jesus makes to the Pharisees in Matt 19:3-6:

³And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" ⁴He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵and said, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

What Malachi is getting at here is that this the uniting of a man and woman together is a work of God. The two becoming one flesh is a powerful act of God. Thus, when a man divorces his wife, breaking faith with her, he is ripping apart what God has joined, he is destroying what God has built, he is vandalizing God's wondrous handiwork. It is akin to kicking your foot through one of Van Gough's paintings; going at Michelangelo's 14-foot-tall sculpture, "David," with a sledgehammer. You do not destroy God's works. God has his fingerprints, his signature, all over this wonderful thing that we call "the one flesh union." Thus, what God has brought together, let not man separate!

He then goes on to say,

*Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? **And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let non of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.***

And here we see one of the primary purposes for which God created man and woman; to raise a godly offspring. He brought them together with a portion of the Spirit so that they might produce for him **Godly offspring**. Notice here that this is one of the purposes of marriage; to give to God a 'godly offspring.' It has always puzzled me why two people would get married without any desire whatsoever to have kids. Some, of course, have a heart adopt, and thus it does not confuse me why they would decide that they don't want to bear children, but to not want kids strikes me as simply ridiculous.

This is one of the reasons, not the only reason, maybe not even the primary reason, but it is a large reason, why God has made the two one.

But really, we have to keep this in context, why is he talking about raising godly offspring? Consider the historical circumstance. What were these Israelites doing? They were divorcing their wives in order to marry foreign women. The issue here has nothing to do with how many kids a married couple should have. In other words Malachi is not saying, “And what was the one God seeking? Married couples having lots of kids in order to make more soldiers for Yahweh” (without a doubt that was a concern, but that is not what this passage is talking about). What God is concerned about here in Malachi is the impact that divorce will have on the parents ability to raise godly offspring. You have to remember here that these men were not just divorcing their wives. They were divorcing their wives in order to marry foreign women, something that God specifically forbid them to do. And why did God forbid them to marry foreign women—do you remember? Deuteronomy 7:1-4

¹When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, ²and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. ³You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

Here we see why God speaks about his desire for a godly offspring. When these Israelite men were faithless with their wives (divorcing them) and married foreign women, they were putting their children under the influence of pagan idolatry. God’s concern here with a godly offspring has everything to do with the devastating effects that these divorces had on their children. These divorces removed their children from a home of Christian influence where both mommy and daddy were teaching the kids who God was and how to live for his glory, to a home where there new mommy taught them how to live the life of a pagan.

As is always said, “Divorce affects the children more than the parents.” That is very true today, and it was very true in the ancient world. The concern that God has here is not just with the issue of the Israelite men being faithless to their wives, it also has to do with the horrible consequences of that faithlessness on their children, and thus on the Israelite society altogether. It is next to impossible to produce a godly offspring when men divorce their wives to marry foreign women.

Notice in the context of Deuteronomy 7:4 the warning that God delivers for those who marry foreign women, “*Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.*” There are serious consequences for exposing your kids to the influence of paganism, and this is why we see in the second half of vs. 15 the exhortation to “guard yourself.” After all, God warned them that if they married foreign women, which was the flip side of divorcing their wives, their foreign wives would

influence them and thus God's judgment would come upon them. This is why I said to the unmarried a few weeks ago that if you love your future kids, you will only marry a believer.

Conclusion

Thus what we see here in the first half of Malachi 2:15 is that God is laying the foundation for the exhortation/warning in the second half of the verse. They need to "guard their spirit" because they are breaking faith with the one with whom they have become one flesh, they are ripping apart what God has brought together, taking a sledge hammer to his handiwork, and they are defiling their kids in the process, incurring the judgment of God. The Israelites are flirting with disaster; they are on the brink of destruction. They are in grave need of repentance.