

## Who Hates . . . Divorce? A Text-Critical Examination of Malachi 2:16



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Malachi 2:16 is one of those “standard” Bible verses regarding divorce commonly heard in sermons and lessons. Most believers probably are familiar with the traditional King James-style rendering of the initial clause: “For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce” (NKJV). Still another familiar translation is represented by the NIV and the updated edition of the NAS (the NAU): “‘For I hate divorce, says the LORD God of Israel.’” However, the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) has a notably different translation: “‘If he hates and divorces his wife,’ says the LORD God of Israel.” So the KJV and NAU agree on God being the one who hates divorce, though they differ in the person of the statement (i.e., speaking of God versus God Himself speaking). In the HCSB, however, the subject of “hate” is the man doing the divorcing, and the object of the hate is the wife being divorced. Those not only are different translations, they are two different ideas.

The purpose of this article is to offer the reader some help in evaluating these translations by examining the primary evidences for the original text of this verse in the Hebrew Old Testament. This will be done by considering the options for the original reading indicated by the ancient textual evidence and their support, followed by a suggestion about which (if any) is mostly likely correct. The article then will conclude with comments about the significance of this matter for exegetical theology. It should be noted that this investigation will be a general text critical examination, not a detailed exegetical analysis.

Studies of the latter kind on this passage already are readily available, particularly in the commentaries.<sup>1</sup> The examination will focus mainly on the first half of the verse, since the translation of the other half does not seem to be in question. Further, the present writer has no particular personal interest in which reading of the text is correct, nor does he seek to influence readers for or against a particular Bible translation.<sup>2</sup>

### I. THE CONTEXT OF MALACHI 2:16

The Book of Malachi contains the messages of and is attributed to the prophet of that name. Little is known of the author; indeed, some question whether “Malachi” is a proper name at all.<sup>3</sup> If it is, the nearest meaning would be “my messenger.” The book generally is dated to the latter 5th century BC. This would make Malachi’s audience post-Exilic Judah, about a century after the initial return from the Exile. It also would make him a contemporary of Ezra and Nehemiah. The ministry of Malachi would have provided prophetic support for the reforms of both leaders.

What is the central message of the book? One reasonable suggestion would be that Yahweh continues to be a covenant-keeping God who expects covenant obedience from His people, or else there will be purging of the covenant breakers.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the book, the faithfulness of the Lord stands in marked contrast with the faithlessness of His people (3:6–7). In 2:10–17, this message is developed by showing that the people were failing in their covenant obligations to the Lord by failing in their covenant obligations to one another—specifically in the area of marital fidelity. Verse 16 falls within this segment and thus is concerned with this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> Two examples are Richard Taylor and Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, (NAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 357–370; and Andrew Hill, *Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 249–259.

<sup>2</sup> The writer also should emphasize that this article is not intended as a response of any kind to the piece contributed to this journal by his distinguished faculty colleague, the Rev. Dr. Alan Branch. While there has been awareness of each other’s efforts and eventual exchange of drafts by mutual interest, each article has been researched and written independently.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, et. al., eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 359.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi* (WBC; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 301.

## II. THE TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Generally, the primary sources for establishing the reading of the OT text are the following in order of importance: the Masoretic Text (MT), Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls, indicated here by Q), the Septuagint (LXX), the Peshitta (Syriac translation, indicated by P), the Targums (Aramaic translations of the Hebrew text, indicated by Targ.), and the Vulgate (the “official” Latin translation of the Western Church, done originally by Jerome and indicated by Vulg.).<sup>5</sup>

The procedure here is simple. The readings of the primary sources will be presented and examined, with some evaluation of these readings. All translations of primary texts are those of the present writer unless otherwise stated or noted.

### The MT<sup>6</sup>

כי שנא שלח אמר יהוה אלהי ישראל וכסה חמס על לבושו אמר  
יהוה צבאות ונשמרתם  
ברוחכם ולא תבגדו:

*“For He hates divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “since it covers violence (or, violence covers) upon his garment,” says the LORD of Hosts. “So be careful in your spirit, and do not deal treacherously.”*

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<sup>5</sup> Textual critics and exegetes may vary slightly with regard to this ranking. The one used in this article is suggested by Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 114. One other witness is the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), generally considered next in importance after the MT. As its name indicates, however, it contains only the first five books of the Bible and so contributes nothing to this study.

<sup>6</sup> The Masoretic Text presented here is the critical edition of the Leningrad Codex (c. early 11th century) used by most scholars in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1984), generally abbreviated *BHS*. The “fifth” edition of this work, known as *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* or *BHQ* gradually is being made available in parts. Other critical editions—such as the Hebrew University project based on the Aleppo Codex, which is about a century older—are in production but are not yet readily available for consultation for this text. Nor do there seem to be significant differences in text between *BHS* and *BHQ*.

As mentioned, the translation of the first clause given by the NKJV is “For the LORD<sup>7</sup> God of Israel says that He hates divorce.” Grammatically, this seems problematic. If the clause *ky šn’ šlh* is taken as an object clause of verb *’mr*, it would be more conventional for the object clause to follow the verb of saying, not precede it.<sup>8</sup> The NKJV translation also is unclear about whether the particle *ky* is a causal conjunction (“for, because”) or a conjunction introducing an object clause (“that”). It cannot be both simultaneously.

The critical apparatus of BHS suggests the text be emended to read *šn’ty*, which would make the verb first person—“I hate”—and turns what was an object clause into a quote or direct speech. This seems to be the basis of the NIV and NAU translations. Emendations, however, by definition are theoretical reconstructions and thus do not exist in the manuscripts or versions. Further, it is not at all clear how the last two letters of the proposed emendation might have just dropped out in transmission.

There might be another basis for a first-person translation. The classic reference grammar by Gesenius lists a few passages in which a participle with a pronoun subject sometimes omits the pronoun, and it cites Mal 2:16 as an example. So, it maintains, the MT should be understood to read effectively [*ny*] *šn’*, hence “I hate (with wooden literalness, “I am hating) . . .”. But the grammar concedes that all examples listed are “more or less doubtful.”<sup>9</sup>

Still, it tends to be a working rule for most exegetes that emendation of the MT—which is the accepted starting point for investigation—is the last resort, something to be done only when one is convinced the correct reading has not been preserved in the available evidence.<sup>10</sup> That may not be the case given other evidence yet to be considered.

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<sup>7</sup> For convenience, the present writer follows the convention of most English Bibles in representing the Divine Name (YHWH, generally given as Yahweh) by “the LORD.”

<sup>8</sup> In the NIV Application Commentary, David Baker remarks that “it appears unnatural for Yahweh to speak of himself impersonally in his own direct speech” (*Joel, Obadiah, Malachi* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006], 258).

<sup>9</sup> E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, eds., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), §116s.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis Brotzman says it well in his highly useful book on OT textual criticism: “But a case of not knowing which of two or more attested readings is original is far better (in my opinion) than the ‘unknown’ evil of suggesting an emendation that has no attestation in any manuscript whatever. In other words, it is better in these cases that exegesis rest on a plausible and attested reading than

Another point for consideration is the relation of *śn'* to the following word, *ślh*. As vocalized by the MT (*śallah*), it could be taken either as imperative or an infinitive. With the latter, *ślh* would be either the complement or the object of *śn'* "He hates [the act of] divorce." The conjunctive accent on *śn'* combined with the disjunctive accent on *ślh* indicates that the Masoretes understood these two words to go together somehow. John Collins, who argues for accepting the MT reading as it is, offers an interesting suggestion. He believes *ślh* should be read as a perfect tense verb. This would make "hate" and "divorce" two parts of a composite action, something he believes to be mirrored in Deut 24:3. The coordinating conjunction would be understood. Thus the translation would be, "he hated [and] divorced."<sup>11</sup> The suggestion does seem preferable to what has been the usual emendation.

In the MT, the first verb of the following clause (*wksh ħms 'l bwšw*) is vocalized as a conjunction prefixed to perfect tense verb, third masculine singular. BHS offers a couple of alternative suggestions: either emend the text to read *wkksh* (which would make it a prepositional phrase; it is not clear how this helps), or revocalize the word to read *wakassē(h)*. The latter option—which is supported by the Kohler-Baumgartner lexicon<sup>12</sup>—would yield the translation "and he covered" or "he covers." In either case, it seems clear that the subject of the verb is third person. Of greater interest is the question of its relationship to the first clause. If the first clause is causal, this latter one beginning with *wksh* would be explanatory: "For . . . since." But if the first clause is conditional, then this clause would be the "then" part (i.e., the apodosis): "If . . . then." If God is the subject of the verb "hate," however, the

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on no attested reading" (*Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994], 130–131). The reader should note that the term "emendation" refers to alteration of the consonantal text. Exploration of alternate vocalizations—which is what Collins' suggestion involves—is less of an issue.

<sup>11</sup> John C. Collins, "The (Intelligible) Masoretic Text of Malachi 2:16; or, How Does God Feel about Divorce?" *Prebysterion* 20.1 (1994): 38. This would require understanding *ślh* (vocalized *śallah* in the MT) to have preserved the original a-vowel under the first consonant of the verb root (cf. P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* [Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000], §52a). Markus Zehnder concurs with this proposal to some extent ("A Fresh Look at Malachi II 13-16," *Vetus Testamentum* 53.2 [2003], 254).

<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 488.

former idea is the one that makes the most sense: “For He hates divorce . . . since it covers [the divorcer’s] garment . . .”.

This reading, then, provides the base line for determining the original reading. But there are other lines of evidence to consider. What do those other lines of evidence indicate?

### Qumran

The evidence of Qumran comes from manuscript 4QXII<sup>a</sup>. The suggested date for it is mid to latter 2nd century BC. The text reads as follows.<sup>13</sup>

כי אם שנתה שלח [אמר יהוה] אל ישראל יכסו חמס על [לבון] שי  
אמר יהוה צבאות ונשמרתם ברוחכם [ול] א תבגדו

*“For if you have hated (and) divorced,” [says the LORD] God of Israel, “they cover My [garment] with violence,” says the LORD of Hosts. “So be careful in your spirit and do [not] deal treacherously.”*

The words contained in brackets are missing from the manuscript and thus reconstructed. This text offers an interesting reading. Instead of just *ky*, the text gives *ky ’m*, which here could be rendered “for if” or conceivably “but if.” The beginning of the verse then would be not an affirmation but a conditional statement. The letters *šnth* indicate a perfect verb in the second masculine singular, thus “you.”<sup>14</sup> The most notable difference from the MT about this word is the absence of the letter aleph, but this happens occasionally with a verb having that letter as the final consonant of the root.<sup>15</sup>

So there are two significant points about this reading. The first is the change from the casual conjunction to a conditional one. The second, more significantly, is that it changes the subject of the verb “hate”—not only from first person to second person, but from God to the individuals being addressed in the context of 2:13–17.

<sup>13</sup> This text is published with notes in Ulrich, E., F. M. Cross, R. E. Fuller, J. E. Sanderson, P. W. Skehan, and E. Tov, *Qumran Cave 4.X: The Prophets* (DJD XV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 221–226.

<sup>14</sup> Though normally written without the final *h*, its presence with this verb form occurs “sporadically” (e.g., Gen 21:23; I Sam 15:18; II Sam 2:26; Joüon and Muraoka, *Grammar*, §42f).

<sup>15</sup> Joüon and Muraoka, *Grammar*, §78e.

In the MT, the word *šlh* is vocalized as an infinitive, which can have various uses and nuances in biblical Hebrew. The *Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, an edited translation of the biblical texts from Qumran, offers this rendering: “For if you hate [and] divorce . . .”.<sup>16</sup> This appears to take *šlh* coordinately with *šnth*, even though there is no coordinating conjunction (the prefixed particle *wə-*, “and”), just as Collins proposes for the reading of the MT.

In the next clause, this manuscript differs from the MT in its reading of the word for “cover” in two ways. It gives the verb as an imperfect instead of a perfect, and also has it as a plural instead of a singular. Further, the word for “garment” has a first person possessive morpheme instead of a third person one as in the MT (thus “my garment” instead of “his garment”). However, while the editors of this text as published by *Discoveries in the Judean Desert (DJD)* are confident in their transcription, they acknowledge that in Qumran script the letters that would distinguish the first person possessive from the third are very similar in appearance.<sup>17</sup>

The evidence from Qumran thus presents the exegete with a reading distinctively different from the MT. The major difference is that it indicates not God but the divorcer as the one doing the hating, which presumably makes the wife being divorced the object of the hating. It also gives the first half of this verse as a conditional sentence.

## LXX<sup>18</sup>

ἀλλὰ ἐὰν μισήσας ἐξαποστείλης λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ καλύψει ἀσέβεια ἐπὶ τὰ ἐνθυμήματά σου λέγει κύριος παντακράτωρ καὶ φυλάξασθε ἐν τῷ πνεύματι ὑμῶν καὶ οὐ μὴ ἐγκαταλίπητε

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Abegg Jr., et al., eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 477.

<sup>17</sup> Ulrich, *Prophets*, 222.

<sup>18</sup> There are different editions of the Septuagint available, some more detailed in their presentation of variants than others. This article uses the text given in *Septuaginta* (ed. Alfred Rahlfs; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979). It is important to remember that the textual transmission of the LXX is a rich and extensive field of investigation to itself. A good introduction is provided by Karen Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000). The use made of it here thus is quite basic.

*“But if having hated, you should divorce,” says the LORD, the God of Israel, “then ungodliness will cover your thoughts,” says the LORD Almighty. “So guard yourselves in your spirit and by no means desert.”*

A standard procedure when considering the evidence of the versions is to retrovert (“back translate”) their readings into Hebrew to see how they differ from the Hebrew texts themselves. In this case, it would seem the Hebrew text might have started *ky 'm šn(')t šlh*. This would agree with the Qumran text. Perhaps it takes the initial clause less as conditional than circumstantial (“if indeed, since”); the word for “hate” here is not a conjugated verb but a participle. Its use as a modifier of the verb “divorce” (ἐξαποστειλής) however, indicates this participle refers to a second person subject, since that is the subject of this verb.

More intriguing are the possible meanings suggested by the mood of the verb. The form of the verb is in the subjunctive mood. It can be used for exhortation, in which case the translation would be “you should divorce.” But this sentence begins (effectively) with the conditional particle ἐάν, so it appears that this is a sentence of general condition: “If . . . then.”<sup>19</sup> The idea, then, being conveyed is not “you ought to divorce,” but rather “if you divorce.”<sup>20</sup>

The Greek text also makes another notable contribution: the word for “ungodliness” (ἀσέβεια) is in the nominative case, and thus would be the subject of the verb “will cover” (καλύψει). That differs from the MT and Q, which usually are understood to make either the divorcer or the act of divorce itself as the subject of the verb “cover.” Assuming that *hms* (“violence”) was the word in the Hebrew text being translated by ἀσέβεια, this suggests the translator took *hms* as the subject of the verb—grammatically arguable, since in the MT *hms* both follows the verb and also matches the verb’s person-gender-number referent. So the translator understood violence to be the thing which does the covering of the garment, rather than being the thing with which the garment is covered as the MT reads.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> N. Clayton Croy, *A Primer of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), §164.(5).

<sup>20</sup> David Clyde Jones has the same analysis and draws the same conclusion in his article, “A Note on the LXX of Malachi 2:16,” *JBL* 109.4 (1990): 683.

<sup>21</sup> As Collins notes, however, there is no meaningful distinction between the two (“Masoretic Text,” 38). “Violence” might seem like a strong word, but Collins points out that it is used elsewhere in a domestic situation (*Ibid.*, n. 14 cf. Gen 16:5).



There are a couple of other points of interest. One is the verb *καλύψει*, which is a future tense verb in the indicative mood. This again agrees with Q, where the corresponding verb is imperfect. The two witnesses differ in the number of the verb; Q gives it as a plural while the LXX has it as singular. The other point of difference is the word *ἐνθυμήματά*. This is the word translated “thoughts,” but the standard lexicon of the LXX takes this as a scribal error for *ἐνδύματά* (“garments”), as does the most recent publication of the LXX in English translation.<sup>22</sup> The pronominal referent also is different. It is second person, hence “your garments” instead of the MT’s “his garments.”

The LXX reading, then, adds to the evidence from Qumran that there was a reading distinctly different from the one contained in the MT. It agrees that the subject of the verb “hate” is “you,” not God. The Greek text also takes the first half of this verse as a conditional sentence. That would seem to strengthen the case in favor of the Qumran reading over the MT.

### Targum<sup>23</sup>

ארי אם סנית את לה פטרה אמר יוי אלהא דישראל ולא תכס חטאה  
בלבושך אמר יוי ותסתמרון ברוחכון בנפשתכון ולא תשקרונ:

*“But if you hate her, divorce her,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and do not conceal sin in your garment,” says the LORD. “So guard your spirit, your soul, and do not act deceitfully.”*

Retroversion generally is unnecessary here due to the close linguistic similarity between Hebrew and Aramaic. Interestingly, the translation is “But if you hate her, divorce her.” The word for “garment” is modified by a second person possessive morpheme, thus yielding a reading in agreement with the LXX.

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<sup>22</sup> J. Lust, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (rev. ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2003), 204; Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 821.

<sup>23</sup> The particular text here is known as *Targum Jonathan*, which may date c. 3rd century AD (Philip S. Alexander, “Targum, Targumim,” *ABD* 6:324–325). The consonantal reading is taken from Alexander Sperber, ed., *The Bible in Aramaic, Vol. 3: the Latter Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 503.

This rendering is interesting for several reasons. To begin with, the Targum agrees with Q and LXX in taking the initial clause as the protasis (the “if” part) of a conditional sentence. But then it interprets the heart of it not as a condemnation of divorce but a concession to it, as something preferable to a situation in which a woman is hated and mistreated, or otherwise denied her marital rights under the Mosaic Law. Again, the verb “hate” is held to have a second person subject. Another point of interest lies in translating the part about “covering” as a prohibition against “concealing” sin.

That is a markedly different idea than the one usually derived from this verse. Some regard this as a case of “converse translation,” a way of making the source text say something different from what may have been intended. The purpose of such a rendering may be to bring the text in line with a theological viewpoint deemed to be authoritative.<sup>24</sup>

The Targum appears to be the only avenue of a useful line of evidence from an Aramaic source. The Syriac version (Peshitta) omits the initial clause and so offers no help in this case. It must be remembered a targum is an interpretive translation and therefore can be expansionistic. But in this case the translation is markedly literal and what can be discerned from it again seems to favor the Qumran/LXX reading over the MT.

### **Vulgate**<sup>25</sup>

Cum odio habueris dimitte dicit Dominus Deus Israhel operiet autem iniquitas vestimentum eius dicit Dominus exercituum custodite spiritum vestrum et nolite despiciere

*“When you have hatred, divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel. “But iniquity will cover his garment,” says the LORD of Hosts. “Guard your spirit and refuse to despise.”*

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<sup>24</sup> Kevin J. Cathcart and Robert P. Gordon, *The Aramaic Bible: the Targums, Vol. 14: the Targum of the Minor Prophets* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 235. Cathcart and Gordon note that a rabbinic discussion of Mal 2:16 can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 90b.

<sup>25</sup> Again, readers should remember the present writer is making a simplified use of this version. The Vulgate has undergone more than one revision and “redaction” since the time of Jerome. He is identified as the translator here both out of tribute to his labors and for convenience. The Latin text being used is *Biblia Sacra iuxta versionem vulgata* (ed. Robert Weber, et al.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994).

Again, the translation here is that of the present writer, though it is very close to that of the Douay-Rheims rendering. The word *dimitte* is a simple imperative, meant to render the Hebrew *šlh*—which as vocalized in the MT, also could be taken as an imperative.<sup>26</sup> The next sentence notes a consequence that will follow: *operiet* is a future indicative tense. This suggests that the corresponding word in the Hebrew text Jerome used may have had an imperfect verb form. That would agree closely with the Quman text, differing only in the number of the verb. The Vulgate agrees with the LXX on another point: *iniquitas* is the translation of ἀσέβεια and is the subject of *operiet*. It is the iniquity that does the covering of the garments.<sup>27</sup> Retroverted to Hebrew, the reading represented by the Vulgate might be *ky šn(')t šlh . . . wyksh ħms 'l-lbwšw*, a reading closer to Q than to the MT.<sup>28</sup>

So the Vulgate here seems to agree with the Targum in taking the verse as a directive that if the man hates his wife, it is preferable to divorce her. Otherwise, this version follows the LXX. This may not seem surprising, since the Greek version of the OT often was accepted more than the Hebrew text in the Western Church during Jerome's time.<sup>29</sup> It is not clear, however, that when Jerome undertook his translation work that he worked primarily from the LXX for more than a few books in the

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<sup>26</sup> Jones observes that there are a few LXX manuscripts that give the verb for divorce as a direct imperative, ἐξαποστείλον, "Divorce!" ("Note," 684). But he regards this reading as secondary.

<sup>27</sup> This might surprise Greek students who have not studied Latin, since in Greek a feminine noun ending in *-ᾱς* is the accusative case (plural) for the first declension (indicating an object of the verb rather than a subject). But in Latin, *iniquitās* is a feminine noun of the *third* declension and one of a group whose nominative (subject) singular case form has an *-v̄s* ending, where *v̄* is a long vowel (Frederick M Wheelock, *Wheelock's Latin* [6th ed. rev.; ed. Richard A. LeFleur; New York: Collins, 2005], 44 n. 2). Another example of such a noun is the term that expresses the first core value of MBTS: *vērītās* ("truth").

<sup>28</sup> According to a Catholic website ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)), the "New Vulgate" offers an updated version: *Si quis odio dimittit, dicit Dominus, Deus Israel, operit iniquitas vestimentum eius, dicit Dominus exercituum*. "If anyone divorces with hatred, says the LORD, the God of Israel, iniquity covers his garment, says the LORD of Hosts." This does not differ appreciably from the reading under analysis.

<sup>29</sup> Würthwein notes that when Jerome eventually resorted to the Hebrew text as the basis for his work, among his critics was none other than Augustine. In contrast to Jerome but in agreement with others of his time, the bishop of Hippo held that the LXX itself was inspired (*Text*, 96).

Writings (*Kethuvim*).<sup>30</sup> The major stage of his effort was the translation of the entire OT from Hebrew. If indeed his work on Malachi was based on whatever Hebrew text was available to him, then the Vulgate may represent another vote in support of a reading—and interpretation—different from the one given in the MT.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

This article has attempted to provide the reader with information useful for evaluating the translations found in differing English versions of Mal 2:16, a verse notable for its contribution to biblical teaching regarding divorce. Based on the foregoing examination, here are some observations.

1. The weight of the evidence seems to agree that, *contra* traditional translations of the MT, God is not the subject of the verb “hate,” whether in first or third person. The subject is the man doing the divorcing. Qumran points to a second person referent, and that reading is supported by the LXX, the Targum and the Vulgate (the Peshitta, as noted, omits the clause). It is possible, however, to read the MT as referring to the divorcer in the third person. God is indeed speaking, but He either is speaking to the divorcer or speaking of him. That would seem to fit the context of 2:13ff generally and the flow of thought in particular. The word “divorce” itself should be taken not as a noun or noun-type word, but as an actual verb in coordination with “hate.” The next clause describes the consequence of this action—that “violence covers the garment,” whatever that means.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> D. C. Parker, “Vulgate,” *ABD* 6:860. The Writings are the third division of the Old Testament in Jewish tradition. Though the NT usually uses a twofold designation—“the Law and the Prophets” (e.g., Matt 7:12, Rom 3:21)—the threefold division of Law, Prophets, and Writings had developed by the time of Christ (Luke 24:44; Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa* 3.25; Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.8). A listing of these books can be found in any work on general Bible introduction, OT introduction, or OT survey.

<sup>31</sup> Determining the meaning of this phrase is a matter not for textual criticism but for lexical analysis. Collins mentions a suggestion from Keil: because dress reflects the inward condition of the heart, the text is saying that divorce for dishonorable reasons reveals a brutish character (“Masoretic Text,” 38). The *HCSB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Holman, 2010) gives the same interpretation (p. 1593). Commentators provide ample discussion on the matter (Zehnder, “Fresh Look,” 265; Taylor and Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, 368–369).

2. It appears that the two best options are either a reading that largely follows the MT or one that largely follows the Qumran text. Here, in the judgment of the present writer, is what the best translation of each reading would be:

MT: “Because he has hated and divorced,” says the LORD God of Israel, “violence covers his garment (or, he covers his garment with violence),” says the LORD of Hosts.

Qumran: “But if you hate and divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “then violence will cover (or covers) your garment,” says the LORD of Hosts.

These two translations do not differ greatly, and therefore choosing between them does not seem to be a significant exegetical-theological matter. The difference lies mainly in the opening clause. The MT takes it as causal, Q takes it as conditional. Either one fits the context of Mal 2:13–16 well. The first translation does have the advantage of leaving the MT consonantal text undisturbed. But if pressed, the present writer would be inclined to choose the Qumran reading because of its intrinsic readability, its agreement with the LXX against the MT, and a slightly better fit with the flow of thought (such as a more consistent use of second person). Another factor will be an exegetical judgment about whether God is condemning a behavior actually performed or admonishing against a behavior being contemplated.

Unfortunately, it is not clear just how the Qumran reading, if original, became “corrupted” to the one found in the MT. That, after all, is the main test for identifying the correct reading: *Which one best explains the others?*<sup>32</sup> It is conceded readily that an argument can be made for preferring the MT on the grounds that it is the “shorter” and “more difficult” reading. The Qumran reading may seem vulnerable to the objection that it “smooths out” the text, which is what the scribal copyists—it is said—might be more likely to do.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the evidence from Qumran and the LXX is at least as ancient as whatever the

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<sup>32</sup> P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *Textual Criticism: Recovering the Text of the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1986), 72.

<sup>33</sup> Fuller, after giving his own thorough analysis, votes in favor of the MT reading, believing the other readings arose out of attempts to make sense of it (“Text-Critical Problems in Malachi 2:10-16,” *JBL* 110.1 (1991): 56. Likewise, Hill apparently agrees with those who hold that the versions were “corrected” in order to conform to Deut 24 (*Malachi*, 249).

MT represents, and when they agree against the MT that is not to be discounted lightly.<sup>34</sup> The proposed reading requires no more emendation than the one apparently adopted by the NAU and some commentators. As John Collins observes, one cannot get the customary translations without altering the MT.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, technically the reading preferred here is not an emendation at all, since unlike the NAU rendering it is a reading attested by two important witnesses.<sup>36</sup>

3. This study provides an apt illustration about the value of Qumran for text critical work. Evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls can call attention to a reading previously unknown, or give support from a Hebrew manuscript for a reading known previously only in a given version.<sup>37</sup> The latter is important particularly when the version is the LXX. Curiously, the *HCSB Study Bible (HCSB)* does not reference Qumran or any other textual evidence in its notes on this verse, despite

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that the editors of 4QXII<sup>a</sup> consider this text “nonaligned”—i.e., displaying an independent text type as opposed to an MT or LXX text type—so the Qumran and the LXX are counted as separate witnesses (Ulrich, *Prophets*, 221).

<sup>35</sup> Collins, “Masoretic Text,” 36. As was mentioned in the analysis of the MT reading, his solution is not to revise any of the consonantal text but to revocalize some of it.

<sup>36</sup> Again, another commentator states that “It is only with great difficulty and some changes” that the reading “I hate divorce [says the LORD . . .]” can be derived. Gordon P. Hugenberger, “Malachi,” *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (ed. G. J. Wenham, et. al.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 887. Cf. Brotzman’s comment in footnote 10 above.

<sup>37</sup> Here is a good example. A major and widely used reference resource in biblical studies is the six volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited chiefly by the late David N. Freeman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992). The article on the Book of Malachi was contributed by Andrew Hill. His discussion about the textual transmission of the book contains the following statement: “The published Qumran materials make no significant contribution to the Hebrew text of Malachi” (4:480). This was true when *ABD* was published, as the Qumran text of Malachi was not published in *DJD* until five years later. Years later, however, when Hill wrote his commentary on Malachi for the *Anchor Bible* series—published a year after the Qumran text appeared in *DJD*—he takes 4QXII<sup>a</sup> into account in his textual analysis (*Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998], 249ff). Still, he chooses his own reading of the MT over the Qumran text.

reaching the same conclusions given here about translation.<sup>38</sup> More curiously, this also is true of commentaries written in recent years.<sup>39</sup>

4. Among expositors, exploration of the various options for the reading of the text has led to two major opinions about the nature of its exhortation. One sees Mal 2:16 as based upon the Deuteronomy passage and thus in harmony with it, and therefore not to be taken as an absolute prohibition against divorce. The other sees the passage as based—in a manner similar to the pronouncement of Christ in Matt 19—upon the original creation of man and woman in Gen 2 (cf. Mal 2:15), and thus much more stringent.<sup>40</sup>

5. But whatever the reading, translation, or interpretation, it seems safe to say that this passage is clear that God is not a fan of divorce, and none of the possible translations indicated by the textual evidence teaches otherwise. Even the Targum and Vulgate translations actually do not favor such a suggestion, since their language reflects the stipulations of Deut 24:1ff. That text is not a *carte blanche* for divorce at will, but a provision for divorce as a regrettable expedient when (to use a popular expression) “life happens”: as the Lord noted, human hearts can be hard (Matt 19:3–8).

Unfortunately, there are those who exploit such a provision for selfish or otherwise dishonorable reasons at the expense of their spouse.<sup>41</sup> Those individuals appear to be the target of Malachi’s indictment. Further, the description “the wife of your *youth*” in Mal 2:14–15 suggests the offenders specifically might be older men who were abandoning their wives of presumably similar age for younger, more appealing women—something not unknown in contemporary culture. Another possibility is that these men were abandoning Judean wives for foreign women with whom marriage was deemed more advantageous for some reason (cf.

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<sup>38</sup> HCSB, 1593.

<sup>39</sup> Baker, for example, does not incorporate 4QXII<sup>a</sup> in his text critical analysis of v. 16, even though his commentary appeared almost a decade after the Qumran manuscript was published in *DJD*.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor and Clendenen would be advocates of the first opinion (*Haggai, Malachi*, 359), while Hill favors the second (*Malachi*, 250–251).

<sup>41</sup> As the Gospels indicate, this had become a considerable controversy by Jesus’ day. When the Pharisees questioned Him about it (Matt 19:1ff and Synoptic parallels), they essentially were asking the Savior to “arbitrate” a difference of opinion between the schools of two great Tannaitic rabbis, Hillel and Shammai. Readers can find the Talmudic discussion (*Gittin* 90a–b) online at the following URL: [http://www.halakhah.com/gittin/gittin\\_90.html](http://www.halakhah.com/gittin/gittin_90.html). The discussion of the interpretation of Deut 24:1ff, and Mal 2:16 is cited toward the end. Among the participants are notable sages such as Akiva and Meir.

Ezra 9:1–2; Neh 13).<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, to take this passage as a stringent condemnation of divorce under any circumstances probably is an overreach, as such a view is difficult to reconcile with the rest of the OT.<sup>43</sup> Or with the NT: even Christ seems to acknowledge infidelity as legitimate grounds for ending a marriage. Paul, while firmly upholding marriage as a lifelong commitment, also allows divorce when there is abandonment by an unsaved spouse (1 Cor 7:10–16).

This text, then, clearly upholds the general biblical teaching that God places a high sanctity upon marriage and expects His people to do so as well. The Lord expects His faithfulness to them to be modeled and mirrored in marital fidelity to their spouses. This is an important element for His blessing upon their home: it is difficult to miss the thematic continuity between Mal 2:13 and the NT admonition that marital strife undermines the effectiveness of prayer (1 Pet 3:7).

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<sup>42</sup> Zehnder, “Fresh Look,” 255.

<sup>43</sup> This caveat is shared by other commentators as well, e.g., Taylor and Clendenen, *Malachi*, 359; Zehnder, “Fresh Look,” 253–254.