

Divorce in the New Testament

Review by Walter Douglas

The New Testament Logia on Divorce: A Study of Their Interpretation from Erasmus to Milton

by Norskov V. Olsen

Tubingen: J. G. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 161 pp., Brooch DM30-; Leinen DM 36-.

Even the most irreligious person expects religion to be relevant for morality. Many feel that this is the only area for which it may still be relevant. The very condemnation of the church's hesitancy and carefulness about issues such as marriage and divorce shows that in some quarters the church is expected to be outspoken about these things.

An institution that provides a system of ultimate meaning and interpretation can hardly avoid being linked to experiences and prescriptions of ethical conduct. Moral standards often form the channel by means of which Christianity can give finite expression to its system of ultimate meaning. Through these moral standards and the quality of commitment to a particular moral system, Christians have hoped that their faith or system of ultimate meaning would become more visible and, therefore, accessible to others.

The New Testament Logia on Divorce claims "that the New Testament teaching on marriage and divorce has experienced a deep influence upon Western civilization." And the subject matter of the book is precisely "a history of the interpretation of the New Testament divorce

texts during the Reformation." Beginning with the late medieval church, Norskov V. Olsen, president of Loma Linda University, focuses his attention on the historical background of the divorce problem and the biblical and theological discussions it created.

Olsen's first section, "The Interpretation of Erasmus and Roman Catholic Reaction," is intensely interesting, especially his discussion of the development of the sacramental idea of marriage. The church's teaching that marriage was a sacrament was of decisive importance in the discussions among the medieval theologians. The sacraments, it was taught, were saving powers, not merely strengthening powers as in Protestantism. As such, they were thought to have a hidden force of their own, mediated to all those who do not resist the grace; this authoritative teaching had an enormous influence on the medieval theologians who sought to draw together the New Testament teachings on the subject.

The influence of the Christian humanists on the interpretation of the biblical passages on divorce is particularly striking. Notice must be given of the fact that this influence coincided with the beginning of the decline of papal authority in the Middle Ages and the dawn of the Renaissance Reformation era.

The second division of the book focuses on an evaluation of "Martin Luther and His Associates." Here the author points to the main principles in Luther's work, which laid the foundation for the Protestant Reformation, and notes that the Reformer's understanding and interpretation of the sacrament of marriage and the question of divorce were derived also from those same principles. Olsen refers to Luther's *The Babylon-*

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ian Captivity of the Church as the treatise in which his first comments on the New Testament Logia on divorce appear. According to Olsen, he argues against the contemporary Roman Catholic teaching that marriage is a sacrament and supports his point of view through an exegetical study of the divorce texts based on Erasmus's Greek New Testament.

After a fairly lengthy discussion of Luther's teaching, Olsen then presents the teachings of some leading theologians and reformers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, both on the Continent and in England.

The author presents Melancthon as believing marriage to be "the legitimate and indissoluble union of one man with one woman." Melancthon therefore warns: "Let married people know that it is the will of God that marriage ought to be on one man and one woman lawfully and indissolubly united, and that indisputably those who furnish cause for divorce as by adultery or desertion, commit sin."

Among the reformed theologians, Olsen selects Zwingli and his successor, Bullinger. Olsen notes that for Zwingli adultery was not the only ground for divorce and that the reformer denied the Catholic concept that married people could not be divorced for any cause. Zwingli suggested that such reasons as sorcery, treachery and parricide are legitimate grounds for divorce.

However, Olsen makes it clear that Zwingli did not condone or even excuse divorce. God had united man and woman into one flesh; therefore, it would be contrary to God's law for either to desert or forsake the other. Furthermore, the dignity of matrimony is illustrated in the relationship between Christ and His church.

Olsen also discusses the teachings of Martin Bucer, Peter Martyr, John Calvin, Theodore Beza on the Continent; and in England, William Tyndale, Thomas Cranmer, John Hooper, John Raynolds, Joseph Hall, Lancelot Andrews and John Milton.

Although Olsen has established that there is a "direct line of interpretation from Erasmus to Milton," one must not think that the book has only historical interest. Indeed, the forcefulness and relevance of his study lies precisely in Olsen's effort to deal with a problem that is of critical importance in our contemporary society.

Although it is not a weakness, one wishes

that this study could have given more careful attention to the cultural, sociological and anthropological influences and outlooks of the period as these impinged on the biblical and theological discussions of the various writers and undoubtedly helped to shape their thinking on the subject.

Altogether, *The New Testament Logia on Divorce* has the distinction of giving a new dimension to the discussion of the problem of divorce and has profound implications and insights for our age. The book is slim but monumental, and the work behind it will not need to be done again.

Journey of Faith

Review by Arthur R. Torres

What A Beginning

by William Loveless

Review and Herald, 127 pp., \$2.65

What A Beginning by William Loveless

brings together a series of sermons originally preached at the Sligo Church in Takoma Park, Maryland. The material, though slightly modified, appears basically in its original form.

The book is not a theology of the doctrine of creation nor a theology on the book of Genesis. It is not a comprehensive treatment of the issues in science and religion or philosophy of science and theology. Neither is it a book that argues for fiat creation and decries evolution. It is rather the work of a pastor who understands some of the obstacles to faith being experienced by many contemporary Christians. It is in this context that this book must be assessed.

Loveless presupposes a personal God who acted in creation. As he says in his preface, "the Genesis account is not on trial in this book." Both his statements and methodology show his belief that creation cannot be proved but must be accepted by faith. He simply leads the reader through several major themes of Genesis, on a journey of faith seeking understanding.

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Does this mean the book is valid only for Christians who already accept the epic stories of Genesis but have honest questions? No more than that the Bible is valid only for Christians. Loveless recognizes that neither God nor fiat creation can be verified empirically or demonstrated by reasoning from cause to effect. He begins from belief, not proof and demonstration. The Bible itself begins this way. It is an approach that has brought millions of unbelievers to faith through the centuries.

I would say that this approach is the book's greatest contribution to Adventist thought. Traditionally, we have sought scientific evidence to support our view of creation. This is why many Adventist books on the subject have been written by authors with a primarily scientific orientation. Loveless takes a theological approach that is interested in the implications of fiat creation for personal meaning and fulfillment.

Loveless uses history, science and philosophy to support the book's major premise, that the Bible answers the basic human questions whereas evolution does not. Yet, these questions are answered in a theological way and not in a scientific way. Where and how did nonliving matter become living? Where and how did life pass from biological to human, to cultural, to social man? The Bible, Loveless says, has a ready and simple answer: In the beginning by the act of God.

The author is well aware of the scientific issues. But he does not set out to topple evolution. He merely points out the inadequacy of evolution to answer the longings of the human heart, then suggests the biblical answer, and asks: "What are your alternatives?"

What about tragedy, pain and suffering in the world? Much of society asks: "How can an omnipotent, morally perfect, personally involved God be reconciled with a world in which most of the species are destined, even in spite of great effort, to perish prematurely, much of the time under circumstances of pain and cruelty?" Loveless suggests that the Bible can best answer this question also. The doctrine of sin teaches that because of human rebellion the perfect society that God created was marred. This world became the battlefield where the forces of good and evil fight to the death. Even so, God's original plan, of making man with free-

dom and the capacity for constructive responsibility, has not been thwarted. Even in tragedy God's purposes are being worked out. It is in this context that Cain and Abel, the Flood, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph are discussed.

Loveless introduces each of his chapters with poetry of his own composition. Each poem is a synopsis of the chapter that follows—and shows why Loveless' style and content have made him a popular preacher in the Adventist Church.

Yet his literary style sometimes obscures creative and important points. Here, for example, are the first and final verses of the poem that leads into the first chapter.

"In the beginning of what, God?
How did You do it?
Why did You do it?"

You moved from void to form and fullness,
You moved from matter to me.
How did You do it?
Why did You do it?"

You rested that I might know
How You did it,
Why You did it.

Blessed Sabbath explanation!"

The last line makes a beautiful theological point on the purpose of the Sabbath. Yet in order to understand that point much explanation is necessary. And while Loveless devotes several paragraphs at the end of the first chapter to the meaning of the Sabbath, the final verse in the poem is never explicitly explained.

Moreover, Loveless' prose is sometimes obscure. I found myself having to reread several chapters. While any book worth reading once is worth rereading, I cannot help but wonder whether some of Loveless' most important points might not be missed by an individual who does not take the time to carefully evaluate this book.

Yet, these criticisms are minor. And, in a sense, they are unfair because the material for this book was a series of sermons which probably were built on information the author had already presented to his congregation. Much in *What A Beginning* deserves to be read and reread. It is useful both to those who experience obstacles to faith and to those who seek a deeper experience of meaning and fulfillment in life.