

Jesus on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage: A Reflection on Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 from an Akan Perspective



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ABSTRACT

Marriage, as depicted in both the Old and New Testaments, is considered a sacred institution created by God. However, this sacred institution has been under attack over the centuries and has resulted in a high divorce rate, particularly among Christians. While this might seem discouraging, it does not suggest that there is no hope for this divine institution. That means that Christianity today must help in formulating a truly Biblical view or principles for Christian marriage to reduce the prevalence of divorce. In the Gospels, Jesus spoke about marriage, divorce, and remarriage, condemning the Jewish leaders' permissive attitude towards divorce. He highlights several principles to emphasize the uniqueness and permanency of marriage that Christians can use as a template for their marriage. This paper thus examined Jesus' perspective on these topics in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 through a literary analysis using related materials. It first explored the context of the selected passages. It also examined four main principles that Jesus presents in the above passage regarding the institution of marriage by analyzing some key Greek words that Jesus used, which are relevant to the topic. These are *kataleipō*, *proskollaō*, *suzeugnumi*, and *chōrizetō*. The study concluded that the principles highlighted by Christ remain as pertinent in today's world as they were during his era. Also when believers adhere to Christ's teachings, Christian marriages can be enhanced and rejuvenated. This write-up adds to the existing literature on the marriage institution.

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INTRODUCTION

According to John F. Kippley, "Christian marriage is a covenant... [that] entails unlimited liability and promise."¹ He defines this covenant as the "self-giving commitment of marriage."² This appears to mean that in Christian marriage, the commitment between a couple is compared to a covenant; a binding agreement or promise that carries significant weight. Thus, when a couple enters into a Christian marriage, they make a solemn promise to each other that is not easily broken. Again, it is "unlimited liability," in the sense that both parties are amply responsible for their marriage and are committed to making it work. This emphasizes the seriousness and depth of the commitment within a Christian marriage.

¹ John F. Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 15.

² Kippley, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality*, 7.

Jesus' perspective on marriage can be gleaned from a number of passages in the Gospels, especially from his teachings in Matthew and Mark. For instance, in Matthew 5:31-32, Jesus discusses the institution of marriage within the context of the Sermon on the Mount. He argues that divorcing one's wife, "except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (ESV). This homily highlights the lifelong commitment that is inherent in marriage. Jesus appears to continue with this discussion extensively in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12 where he reveals his strong affirmation of the sacredness and permanence of marriage. He demonstrates that marriage is an institution ordained by God and thus intended to be a lifelong union of body, mind, and spirit between one man and one woman. This divine institution, however, appears to be undermined leading to an increasing rate of divorce cases. The question arises as to why this unfortunate situation exists. One challenge that often undermines our marriages is our understanding and application of authority. In some societies, men have been perceived as the ultimate authority figures, responsible for making decisions and exerting control within the household. And this often affects many marriages as husbands tend to see their spouses as subordinates or inferior. Divorce, in many societies, is sanctioned by cultural and religious beliefs. Some cultures allow divorce in certain circumstances, such as unfaithfulness, poverty, sexual deprivation, or ill-treatment, while others strictly forbid it. Religious teachings also play a role with different faiths having their doctrines and interpretations regarding the permissibility of divorce. Additionally, divorce has been influenced by changing social norms and values. As societies have evolved, attitudes towards divorce have shifted, leading to different legal frameworks and social acceptance of new relationships. Societal changes, such as increased gender equality and individual freedom, have also impacted the prevalence and acceptance of divorce. African societies are not exempted from this situation. For instance, among the Akan people of Ghana, *awaregyae/awareguo* (divorce) is allowed, however, it is considered the last resort when handling marital conflicts. The Akan, within their religio-cultural context, regard *awaregyae* as an unpleasant event. The term *awaregyae* means "abandonment of the marriage state", with the verbal phrase *gyae aware*, 'to leave off marriage', also idiomatically expressed by *gu no hyiri*, 'to sprinkle her with white clay'.³ It is believed that both the man and the woman can call for the annulment of the marriage and several factors can lead to this, some of these are sterility, adultery, impotence, witchcraft, quarreling, alcoholism, and cruelty, among others.

Divorce has been a disturbing phenomenon for centuries and appears to be on the rise in recent times not only among the general population but also among Christians. While this might seem discouraging, it does not suggest that there is no hope for this divine institution. That means that Christianity today must help in formulating a truly Biblical view or principles for Christian marriage to reduce the prevalence of divorce. Jesus, in his teachings in the Gospels, appears to be much concerned with matters of divorce and remarriage and thus significantly deals with this subject a number of times. He highlights several principles to emphasize the uniqueness and long-lasting nature of marriage that Christians can use as a template for their marriage. Thus, this paper focuses on four of these principles from the selected passages and explores their relevance for Christian marriage, especially in the Ghanaian (Akan) context.

The Context of Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12

In Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12, the context is a conversation between Jesus and the Pharisees about the topic of divorce. Jesus traveled to the region of Judea and large crowds followed him. The Pharisees approached Jesus and asked if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause. Jesus first responded by drawing attention to the creation narrative in Genesis 1:27 where "God created Adam and Eve male and female, showing that his design for marriage involves a man and a woman. By implication, any other design is human and not God's"⁴ Second, he draws attention to the original intention of marriage from the interpretation of Genesis 2:24 in the Septuagint, indicating that,

³ R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Arts in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 97.

⁴ Samuel Ngewa, "Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage", in Tokunboh Adeyemo (Gen. Ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1149.

marriage, from the beginning, is intended to be a lifelong commitment and that divorce is only allowed in cases of sexual immorality. The disciples were surprised by this teaching and commented that it might be better not to marry, perhaps if divorce is so limited. Jesus then spoke about eunuchs and the different paths to relational commitments, whether by remaining single, marrying, or choosing a life of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Thus, while the inauguration of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry posits both marriage and celibacy as options rather than obligations, this is not the case in the African context. This is because in Africa, "The pressure from society to marry, or at any rate have children, is so strong that many Africans, especially men, just cannot conceive of life without marriage or perhaps more accurately, regular sex."⁵ Kwame Gyekye, for instance, confirms this among the Akan people of Ghana when he writes, "Marriage is a requirement of the society, an obligation every man and woman must fulfill, a drama of life in which every man and woman must participate."⁶ Gyekye's statement shows that marriage is not an option among the Akan people. Once a person is born into Akan society, he or she is expected to marry at a point in time. The Akan proverbs, *wiase wɔtena no baanu baanu* ("People live in the world in pairs") and *hu m'ani so ma me nti na atwe mmienu nam* ("Deers walk in pairs so that when one has a speck fall in its eye the other can blow it off,"⁷) teach a general principle about interdependence, and in this case, the need for every man or woman to have a heterosexual partner in order to become socially complete.

The question the Pharisees' posed to Jesus in Matthew 19:3 and Mark 10:2, "Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause?" appears to be rooted in the Mosaic law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 which sets guidelines for divorce in the ancient Hebrew society. It allows a man to divorce his wife if he finds some "indecency" in her, although the exact meaning of "indecency" is subject to interpretation. The man must provide a divorce certificate and send the woman out of his house. However, if this divorced woman remarries someone else and either that man divorces her or dies, she cannot return to her former husband. The passage emphasizes that the woman would be considered "defiled" and that it would be an abomination to remarry her. In the days of Jesus, there were at least two main rabbinic schools of thought namely, the Hillelites and the Shammites. These groups had conflicting positions on matrimonial law. They disagreed on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, particularly the Hebrew phrase *erwat dābār*, which the Septuagint (LXX) translates as *aschemon pragma* meaning "an indecent matter."⁸ And this phrase has for many centuries been a point of discussion as to what it truly means. Hillel broadly interpreted the phrase to allow husbands to divorce their wives for almost any reason or indecency, even the burning of the husband's food by the wife. According to Joe Kapolyo, "In contemporary terms, we might say that a man might divorce his wife for putting too much salt into his food or (in Zambia) for letting another man use his *akatemala cupo*, the little pot specially set aside to hold boiling water for the husband alone to wash his face in."⁹ Shammai on the other hand, opposed this view, allowing divorce only on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness, such as adultery.¹⁰ Incidentally, some members of the Jewish community at the time held a more lenient and questionable stance regarding adultery. To strengthen this argument, there were suggestions that a man could only be considered guilty of adultery if he had sexual relations with a married woman whose husband was still alive at the time of the affair. This is supported by Andrew O. Igenzo's statement thus:

...according to the culture of ancient Israel, a man was not thought to be committing adultery against his wife if he had affairs with another woman. If this other woman was an unattached maiden, a divorcee, a widow or slave girl, or even a professional prostitute, he was not committing adultery. But if she was someone else's wife or betrothed, then he was committing adultery not against his wife, but against the other man. But if a married woman had affairs with any other man she was an adulteress.¹¹

⁵ Joe Kapolyo, "Matthew" in Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary*, 1148, 1150.

⁶ Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction for Senior Secondary Schools* (Accra: Sankofa Publishing Co., 1996), 76.

⁷ Kofi Asare Opoku, *Hearing and Keeping: Akan Proverbs*, (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1997), 25.

⁸ A. D. Verhey, "Divorce in the NT" in Geoffrey W. Bromley et al (eds.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol 1: A-D, Fully Revised (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 976.

⁹ Kapolyo, "Matthew", In Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary*, 1148.

¹⁰ S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896), 271.

¹¹ Andrew O. Igenzo, *Polygamy and the African churches: A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*

So, it appears from Igenzoza's quote that the law was framed in favor of the man. Charles H. Talbert also contributes to the discussion when he avers that, "According to strict Jewish opinion, only the man could divorce the woman. Shammai said this could be done only if the woman was guilty of sexual immorality. Hillel said it was possible for anything offensive to the husband, for example, if the wife spoiled his food (m. Gittim 9:10)."¹² This gross indifference on the part of the law still manifests in most of today's African cultural practices. For instance, in a customary marriage, the man can marry multiple women simultaneously but, the woman is prohibited from marrying more than one man at a time. Marian Christabel Ofori Atta-Boahene confirms this among Ghanaians when he says, "Customary marriages are potentially polygamous, meaning the husband can marry other women."¹³ This suggests that indigenous Ghanaian marriage which is also a customary marriage is potentially polygamous. The author would like to say that the term polygamy as used by Ofori Atta-Boahene is not a prerogative of Africans. Peter K. Sarpong has argued against this by distinguishing between polygyny and polyandry – the two terms that make up polygamy. For Sarpong, the problem has been the use of these terminologies to define multiple partner relationships and how often they get confused. He elucidates that, polygamy is the broader term used to describe any form of "multiple marriages." He further adds that while Africans often describe polygamy as a man with multiple wives or polygyny, it also embraces a woman with multiple husbands or polyandry, and this happens globally in different forms. Acquiring wives simultaneously, that is, at the same time, in Africa, according to Sarpong, is not different from serial marriages where people marry, divorce, marry again, divorce, and remarry.¹⁴ Rattray argues that polygamy among the Akan of Ghana was "legal and in theory is universal."¹⁵

It may not be fair to say that polygamy is practiced among the Africans. Strictly speaking, among the Africans what is normally practiced is polygyny rather than polyandry. Thus, the type of polygamous relationship that exists in Africa is polygynous. Sarpong, for instance, goes further to say, "If it is polygamous it may be either polygynous (one husband and two or more wives at the same time) or polyandrous (one wife and two or more *lawful* husbands at the same time). As far as I know of, no society in Africa practices polyandry. But polygyny is widespread also in Ghana."¹⁶

Going back to the phrase *erwat debar*, it appears modern Christian scholars also have different viewpoints regarding the exact interpretation or meaning. According to Peter Craigie, the meaning of this phrase is uncertain, although it may have been a legal term. The context in which it appears in Deuteronomy 23:14 implies that it refers to something unclean but cannot refer to adultery, which was a capital offense. For him, it may relate to a physical defect in a woman, such as an unattractive appearance or infertility. According to S. R. Driver, the expression cannot refer to adultery because that would warrant the death penalty as stated in Deuteronomy 22:22. Instead, the use of the phrase in Deuteronomy 23:14 suggests something inappropriate rather than immoral, leading to the belief that it should be translated as "*immodest or indecent behaviour.*"¹⁷ Duane Christensen believes the expression is equivalent to the English "caught with one's pants down." He interpretively translates the phrase "caught with her pudenda exposed," because he believes the phrase indicates "something shameful and offensive" to which the woman is exposed publicly.¹⁸ These differing interpretations show that no consensus has been reached. The Asante Twi version of the Bible uses *aniwudee* to translate *erwat dābār*, while generally among the Akan *aniwudee* means "*shameful things or deeds*;

(Ibadan: African Association for the Study of Religion Nigerian Publications Bureau, 2007), 125.

¹² Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 44.

¹³ Marian Christabel Ofori Atta-Boahene, "Divorce in Ghana: An Examination of Women's Property Rights", (Unpublished Master of Laws Degree [LLM] Dissertation, University of Mauritius, 2010), 22.

¹⁴ Peter K. Sarpong, *Odd Customs: Stereotypes and Prejudices*, (Accra: Sub-Saharan Pub., 2012), 58.

¹⁵ Rattray, *Religion and Arts in Ashanti*, 95.

¹⁶ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture*, (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974), 78. The emphasis is in the original source.

¹⁷ Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 271.

¹⁸ Duane L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary: Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, Vol. 6B, (Dallas, Texas: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2002), 148, 174.

lewdness”.¹⁹ It refers to actions or behaviours that are deemed inappropriate, disgraceful, or indecent. So broadly speaking, *aniwudee* covers anything and behaviours that are culturally or morally unacceptable. So, the question is, how does this relate to the context of marriage? To what extent can *ɔbaa warefoɔ* (a married woman) be described as *oniwufɔɔ* (a shameless person)? Osei Kwadwo, in his attempt to understand factors that may lead to a husband divorcing his wife among the Akan, highlights the following, “Disrespect for husband, adultery, theft, drunkenness, sex starvation, being quarrelsome, disrespect for in-laws...and friends, barrenness, laziness.”²⁰ In other words, these actions and behaviours may be considered *aniwudee* on the part of a married woman and allow for the possibility of divorce in the Akan cultural context. Thus, it seems that, from the Akan perspective, both the interpretation of *erwat dābār* by Hillel and Shammai are considered valid. Despite these divergent views, it is said that both Hillel and Shammai permitted remarriage after a divorce. Though Jesus, like the Shammai school, believed that infidelity was the only valid reason for divorce, He stood apart from both schools by stating that remarriage, except in cases of infidelity, amounted to adultery (Matt. 19:9 and Mk. 10:11). This means that Jesus set a higher standard than the existing interpretations of his time.

The debate between these two rabbinic schools of thought had gained prominence especially due to the scandalous affair that ensued between Herod Antipas and his half-brother Herod Philip’s wife, Herodias. Philip and Herod were brothers from the same father but different mothers. Philip married Herodias and Antipas also had a wife. At some point, Antipas and Herodias decided to divorce their spouses in order to marry each other. John the Baptist was upset and denounced the affair as unlawful, thus challenging Antipas’ sexual immorality. This subsequently led to John’s arrest and execution by Antipas (cf. Matt. 14:1-12 and Mk. 6:14-29). Throughout history, there have been numerous cases, including those occurring in modern times, that suggest human beings have failed to uphold the sanctity of marriage as intended by God. Despite the guidelines for divorce provided in the Mosaic law (Deut. 24:1-4), it is evident in both the Old and New Testaments that divorce was not part of God’s original design for marriage. In the selected passage, Jesus implies that the Mosaic law was implemented due to sin and the stubbornness of humanity (Matt. 19:8 and Mk. 10:5).

So, based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that the question posed by the Pharisees to Jesus was a trap, and indeed it was. This is because if Jesus had stated that divorce was permissible for any reason, he would have contradicted Moses, who only allowed divorce in cases of indecency. Once again, if he were to state that it was unlawful, he would face the disapproval of the majority of the population, as divorce was a widespread custom among them.

A Discussion on Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12

This section discusses the principles that Jesus puts forward in the above passage by exploring four major Greek words that are considered essential and revolve around these principles. These words are *kataleipō*, *proskollaō*, *suzeugnumi*, and *chōrizō*, and each one will be discussed in the order they appear in the selected text.

Kataleipō

The first principle Jesus highlights is the importance of a man leaving his parents (Matt 19:5; Mk.10:7). The Greek word used to translate “leave” is *kataleipō*, which is composed of two parts: *kata* a preposition with various meanings such as “against, toward, from, according to, after, etc.”, and *leipō* which means “to lack, to be absent, be wanting, want or destitute.” According to Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *leipō* denotes “leave behind...of persons dying or going into a far country...bequeath...forsake, abandon.”²¹ The definition provided by Liddell and Scott seems to

¹⁹ J. G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, (Basel: The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society, 1933), 346.

²⁰ Osei Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, (Buokrom-Kumasi: Cita Press Ltd, 2002), 48.

²¹ Henry G. Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 898.

highlight different aspects of separation or departure, whether in the context of death, travel, or abandonment. Thus, the term could refer to the act of departing from a loved one or leaving behind a place or something and the people associated with it. Thus, *leipō* suggests a sense of abandonment or desertion, indicating that someone has chosen to leave or renounce their association or responsibility towards a person, place, or thing. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich explain *leipō* thus, “*be left (behind), fall short, be inferior...be or do without, lack, be in need or want (of)...*”²² Thus *kataleipō*, as suggested above, can refer to the act of physically leaving a place, an object, or someone behind, or it can have a more abstract meaning, such as leaving behind a habit or goal.

The 2018 New Revised Asante Twi Version translates *kataleipō* as *begyā* from the verb “*gyā*” and according to Christaller, *gyā* has a range of meanings such as, “*to leave, forsake...to let loose, quit one’s hold, let pass, let slip...to let go, let alone...to loose, loosen, release, set free or at liberty...to omit, be without...to desist from...to dismiss, let go, set free...to give up, relinquish, abandon, drop...to slacken, relax...to cease.*”²³ Christaller’s definition of “*gyā*” clearly agrees with *kataleipō* indicating that within the Akan context, *gyā* also has both physical and conceptional meanings just like *kataleipō*. Again, both words suggest a complete leaving and anything that could hinder the joining should be left behind. This begs the question as to whether Christ is asking for the total neglect of one’s parents. Certainly not! Though Christ understood that a young man entering marriage could be burdened by the concerns of his parents, he does not suggest that they should be neglected entirely. Some scholars suggest that the Hebrew context of the word used could mean completely “*forsaking,*” “*deserting,*” or “*giving up*” on one’s parents. In traditional Jewish society, it was often the woman who left to join her husband, who may have been living with his parents. Some argue that the charge to leave does not necessarily mean leaving the parent’s house, but rather a shift in priorities. After marriage, a man’s obligations shift from his parents to his wife.²⁴

The researcher is of the view that *kataleipō* or *begyā* is about the man becoming independent from one’s parents and establishing a new family unit through marriage. Concisely, “*leaving behind*” is in reference to a change of state from living under the care and authority of one’s parents to forming one’s own life and making decisions independently. So, Christ is talking about a movement from a dependent child to an independent adult where one is able to establish a new bond and responsibility with their spouse. In other words, the phrase can represent both a physical departure from the parental home and an emotional detachment, symbolizing the growth of an individual as they navigate the world on their own. However, leaving for the newlywed couple has often resulted in challenges, especially in Africa which includes the Akan people. Igenozā agrees with the researcher on this as he likewise believes that leaving poses a problem in Africa as the groom has to manage a two-tier relationship with his wife and parents. He argues that although leaving allows for bonding, it can be difficult to balance the relationships.

A bridegroom cannot sustain two primary social relationships simultaneously, in the sense of being under his parents, and at the same time the head of his own family unit. Such a bridegroom must be the head of his newly constituted family unit, and not take orders from his parents. Such a situation would create for his new wife an unworkable hierarchical arrangement. “*Forsaking*” however does not mean that a husband no longer has obligations towards his parents and kindred.²⁵

It can thus be summarized that *kataleipō* or *begyā* does not imply the issue of neglect, both husband and wife are expected to fulfill their due obligations towards their parents. In other words, the point of emphasis in Jesus’ homily is the need for personal responsibility and self-reliance, moving away from the care and authority of parental figures to develop an independent sense of self. This shift allows for a genuine companionship to develop and thrive between the couple. It is important to note

²² William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*, (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 471.

²³ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, 157.

²⁴ Andrew O Igenozā, *Polygamy and the African churches: A Biblical Appraisal of an African Marriage System*. (Ibadan: African Association for the Study of Religion Nigerian Publications Bureau, 2007), 73.

²⁵ Igenozā, *Polygamy and the African churches*, 73.

that the “leaving behind” mentioned in the text is not just limited to the man’s parents, but includes anything that could interfere with the marriage. This could include careers, social status, friends, technology, and other distractions that could affect the relationship’s stability if not managed properly. It is worth mentioning that the word “man” *anthropos* in the Greek text which the Twi version translates as *onipa* refers to all humans, regardless of gender, so the responsibility of leaving parents and distractions behind should be shared between partners.

Proskollaō

The second principle Jesus talks about is the cleaving of a man to his wife (Matt 19:5; Mk.10:7). The term “cleave” in the text is derived from the Greek word *proskollaō*. It is a compound word derived from the preposition *pros* which means “unto, to, with, for, against, among, at” and the verb *kollaō* which according to Liddell and Scott means, “glue, cement...join one metal or other substance to another...join fast together, unite...put together or build...”²⁶ Thus, Liddell and Scott appear to be suggesting that *kollaō* refers to the act of physically joining one metal, material, or substance to another using glue or cement with the intention of creating a strong connection. Their definition can also be interpreted to mean assembling or constructing something by putting its parts together, thus building a cohesive whole. A. W. Fortune adds that *kollaō* means “to adhere to,” or “to join one’s self to.”²⁷

In other words, Fortune appears to be saying that the term can be used to describe one’s compliance with or commitment to a certain set of principles, rules, guidelines, beliefs, or code of conduct. It is aligning oneself with or becoming a part of something or somebody and acting in accordance with the required principles or standards. However, it is also used to denote a strong bond or attachment and is often used metaphorically to mean a close connection or devotion to someone or something. Arndt and Gingrich affirm this when they opine that the term in its literal sense means to “adhere closely to, be faithfully devoted to, join...some...Of the attachment felt by a husband for his wife...of a wife in relation to her husband...”²⁸ In Genesis 2:24, the Hebrew equivalent of this term is *dabaq*, which translates “to cling, cleave, keep close.”²⁹ In both Greek and Hebrew contexts, the terms often refer to a physical joining or fastening firmly together, such as when different things are tightly attached or glued or when materials such as metals or thermoplastics go through the manufacturing process of welding to join them firmly together. Additionally, it is suggested that in a more abstract sense, *dabaq* just like the Greek *kollaō* could imply “loyalty, devotion.”

Yet again, “The figurative use of *dabaq* in the sense of ‘loyalty’ and ‘affection’ is based on the physical closeness of the persons involved, such as a husband’s closeness to his wife...”³⁰ The 2012 and 2018 Asante Twi versions translate *proskollaō* as *akɔfam* and *akɔbata* respectively. However, according to Christaller, there is no disparity in these words as they both imply “to encircle with one’s arms; to embrace...to adhere closely, to cleave, cling, or stick to.”³¹ So just like *proskollaō*, the Twi words *akɔfam*, and *akɔbata*, beyond their literal meaning of physically joining things or materials together, have an abstract meaning. They both express a sense of unity, cooperation, attachment, intimacy, or doing something jointly.

It is helpful to know that both the Hebrew, Greek, and Asante Twi terms are used to express intimacy or attachment, whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual. Jesus, perhaps in using *proskollaō* or *akɔfam/akɔbata* in the context of marriage, may be referring to the deep marital connection and the value of remaining faithful and united in the marriage relationship irrespective of the difficulties that may crop up. Thus, Jesus in essence, appears to be highlighting the idea of a lifelong commitment and devotion in marriage, indicating that a husband should remain firm and loyal to his

²⁶ Liddell & Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 972.

²⁷ A. W. Fortune, “Cleave” in James Orr (Gen. Ed.). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Vol. 1: A-Clemency. (Illinois, Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 668.

²⁸ Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 723.

²⁹ Merrill F. Unger and William White, Jr., (eds.), ‘Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament,’ in *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1985), 37.

³⁰ Unger and White, Jr., (eds.), ‘Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament,’ 37.

³¹ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, 115.

wife. Again, sexual intercourse which consummates the marriage relationship may be playing on his mind as it is an important component of a healthy and fulfilling marriage. Jesus may be speaking about sex but he does so in a euphemistic manner. For a man and a woman coming from culturally diverse backgrounds into a lifelong relationship, genuine love is needed to hold them firmly together. And this love must be demonstrated in an emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual sense. Both the man and the woman have sexual needs and these can be met only within the confines of marriage and love. This may resonate well with Africans precisely because for them, sex is considered sacred or sacramental. John S. Mbiti speaks on the sacredness of sex within African marriages. He indicates, "...rituals are solemnly opened and concluded with actual or symbolic sexual intercourse between husband and wife or other officiating persons. This is like a solemn seal or signature, in which sex is used in and as a sacred action, as a 'sacrament' signifying inward spiritual values."³² This suggests that sexual intercourse is seen as a powerful symbol representing deeper spiritual values. This means that for Africans, sex between a husband and a wife is not just a physical act that gratifies their desire but a spiritual one that cements their marriage union. This may explain why Africans treat sexual matters with a high degree of meticulousness and shrewdness. E. A. Oke suggests that children are barred from engaging in sexual matters. In fact, he says that "it is a great offence on the part of children to look at or talk (joke) about the genitals of their parents."³³ And the reason he gives is that "sexual organs are the gates of life."³⁴ Perhaps, the reason for placing such a value on this is because these organs are what spiritually hold their parents together. Oke, on the other hand, argues that marital sex is utterly distinct from mating. She describes mating as "a union of a man and a woman primarily for the purpose of sexual gratification."³⁵ Further, she says that this union does not come with any special commitment or attachment on the part of those who engage in it.³⁶ The Akan call or describe such an informal relationship or concubinage as *mpenatwe* and is not given the same status or prestige as marriage. For the Akan, sexual intercourse is an integral part of life and it is also for the continuity of life; hence, they call it *ɛdie* (eating) from the verb *di* (to eat). This word suggests that when a husband and a wife are having sexual intercourse, it is euphemistically referred to as "eating".³⁷ This is instructive because it shows that among the Akan people, the sacred act of sex serves as a demonstration of unity, cooperation, attachment, and intimacy. Therefore, both Africans in general and specifically the Akan people might not find it difficult to understand Jesus' use of the term *proskollaō* "cleaving" to refer to a deep attachment to one's spouse that results through coitus.

Suzeugnumi

The third principle that Jesus talks about in the text is the joining of a man and a woman into one flesh (Matt. 19:5, 6; Mk 10:8). This is reflected in the Greek verb *Suzeugnumi*, which means, "to yoke together".³⁸ In ancient Greece, the phrase "yoked together" typically referred to the act of joining two animals, such as oxen, by attaching a yoke to their necks. It signified the physical connection between the animals, which allowed them to work together in agreement, usually to pull heavy loads or plow fields. Figuratively, being "yoked together" in ancient Greek could also imply a partnership or collaboration between people, especially "union in wedlock"³⁹ where a couple was united and working towards a common goal, just like the animals joined by a yoke. In regards to comparing the institution of marriage to a yoke, Adam Clarke has explained that in ancient times, a yoke would be placed on the necks or chains on the arms of a newly married couple to symbolize their oneness. He says, "Among the ancients when persons were newly married, they put a yoke upon their necks, or chains

³² John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Morrison & Gibb Ltd., 1975), 146.

³³ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 146.

³⁴ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 146.

³⁵ E. A. Oke, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (Reprint, London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1991), 94.

³⁶ Oke, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, 94.

³⁷ Daniel Osei Bediako-Akoto, *Towards Holistic Sexual Flourishing in Africa: Another Look at Human Sexuality from a Ghanaian Christian Standpoint with the Presbyterian Church of Ghana as a Case*, (Utrecht: Boekencentrum Academic, 2017), 130.

³⁸ Vine, 'An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words,' 334.

³⁹ Vine, 'An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words,' 334.

upon their arms, to show that they were to be one, closely united, and pulling equally together in all the concerns of life.”⁴⁰ Perhaps, this act of joint yoking may represent something beyond human comprehension. However, what is clear is that through marriage, God has united two distinct individuals into *sarka mian* (“one flesh”), while still respecting their individuality and differences. Before elaborating on the concept of becoming “one flesh”, it is important to note that the yoke may symbolize the love and commitment that the couple must display in order to sustain and protect their union from falling apart or deteriorating. The Twi version translates the Greek *suzeugnumi* as *abom* and it carries a similar expression as the Greek. Christaller defines *abom* as, “...to join closely...to agree, to be in unison or concord...intimate...unite; to discharge itself into...make friends...to reconcile...connect...compact...compose...”⁴¹ This definition clearly reveals that the word *abom* deals with the idea of bringing different elements or individuals together in a unified and cohesive manner. Akan society places great importance on building and maintaining close relationships within families, communities, and broader social circles. The concept of *abom* reflects the idea of coming together and being intimately connected, both physically and emotionally for a common purpose. Thus, the Akan understanding of *abom* may help them to appreciate Jesus’ use of *suzeugnumi* as it would resonate well with their cultural values of unity, agreement, and strong social bonds, including the sacred bond of marriage. So, in essence, what the Akan couple may hear Jesus saying is that once they are united in marriage, they are joined firmly.

Regarding the issue of “one flesh”, it has been argued by some that the flesh (Heb. *bāsār*), among other things in Jewish anthropology, denotes the whole person or “the human body in its entirety.”⁴² In fact, it has been argued by some scholars that the man and the woman become one person. This seems to be pointing back to the creation story where humankind (*Adam* in Hebrew and *Anthropos* in Greek) was originally created by God (Gen. 1:26). Igenzoza also argues that the *sarka mian* should not be seen as referring to kinship, sexual intercourse or procreation but as the fulfillment the couple finds in each other and ultimately in God. Furthermore, some have suggested that the *sarka mian* is referring to the couple’s becoming one in mind or heart. The Akan expression for *sarka mian* is *honam korɔ*, and *honam* is believed to be “the body of a man or animal.”⁴³ However, *honam* is a compound term made up of *ho* (being, self, or personality) and *nam* (flesh). Therefore, the literal meaning of *honam* is “the flesh of a person” as against *nipadua*, the “body of a man...” that Christaller talks about. It is believed that *honam* is physical and can easily be influenced by moral vices. This is confirmed by the phrase *honam akɔnɔ* (fleshly desires). This raises the question of how an Akan Christian would appreciate Jesus’ concept of a husband and wife becoming *honam korɔ* (one flesh) since in Akan thinking, *honam* may be inferior to *nipadua*. It is worth noting that in Greek understanding, the term “flesh” has a broader meaning than just the physical “...material that covers the bones of a human or animal body...” It also refers to “the body itself, viewed as substance...”⁴⁴ Thus, “flesh” could be interpreted as a way to describe a human being, someone made of flesh and blood. Jesus may be referring to the entirety of the human person when he speaks about the flesh and the joining of married couples as one body. Furthermore, Arndt and Gingrich suggest that “flesh” can also be understood as “the external or outward side of life, as it appears to the eye...that which is natural or earthly...the source of the sexual urge, without any suggestion of sinfulness connected...”⁴⁵ From this perspective, it is possible that Jesus deliberately chose the word “flesh” to emphasize it as a means by which a husband and wife intimately desire each other and become one in that regard. This broader view may aid in the understanding and appreciation of what Jesus is saying in the Akan community.

⁴⁰ Clarke, Adam. *Clarke’s Commentary: Matthew - Luke*, (Wesleyan Heritage Publications, 1998).

⁴¹ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, 22-23.

⁴² A. C. Thiselton, “Flesh” in Colin Brown (Gen. ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: A-F, (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1998), 671-682 (672).

⁴³ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language Called Tshi (Twi)*, 185.

⁴⁴ Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 750-751

⁴⁵ Arndt and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 750-751

The Akan proverb, “*ɔne me te se honam ne ntoma*” literally, “we are like flesh and clothe” may also help throw light on the Akan understanding of Jesus’ use of *honam*. This proverb emphasizes the importance of close friendship and unity between two people, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within the Akan community. It suggests that similar to how clothes cannot be functional without being worn by someone, people thrive when they work together and support one another. This proverb reminds the Akan people of their shared humanity and the importance of unity in their relationships. Jesus may perhaps be conveying to the Akan that, just as flesh and cloth are inseparable, a husband and wife are mutually reliant on each other for support, cooperation, and overall success. Therefore, a husband should view his wife as an extension of himself and vice versa. In addition, the idea of two individuals becoming one can be understood in the broader spiritual context of the Akan people as their worldview emphasizes a strong relationship between the physical and the spiritual realms. As previously mentioned, in Akan culture, marriage is seen as a sacred or sacramental union through sexual intercourse. Therefore, even though sex is a physical act, it is believed to have a spiritual significance in joining a husband and a wife. Consequently, the concept of *honam korɔ* can be seen as highlighting the bond and unity that is established when two people enter into a marital relationship, wherein their *akra* (souls), *sunsum* (spirits), *mmogya* (blood), and *nipadua* (bodies) merge together in some way. This, possibly can be much appreciated by understanding marriage from Paul’s perspective as *musterion* (“a mystery”) (Eph. 5:31-32). Originally, this word was used in a cultic ceremony in which the initiate was forbidden to divulge the content of the ritual performed between him and the deity since it was a medium through which the latter had united with him or her.⁴⁶ Besides, its general meaning in the New Testament is “that which is unspeakable.” Perhaps, it was in this sense that Paul used it to describe the relationship between Christ and the church. But what is more striking is why he chose to use marriage to portray this mysterious union between Christ and the church. What is more revealing is how Paul interprets sex in a strictly mystical sense (1 Cor. 6:16). If sex lost its sacramental meaning, then marriage may be reduced to a mere partnership; therefore, it seems Paul was guarding against any form of deterioration of the first divinely established institution (cf. Heb. 13:4). There are some people who support the idea of divorce by citing Paul’s reference to remarriage in Romans 7:1-3. However, this viewpoint is at odds with the overall theology of marriage, particularly as understood by writers of the New Testament. Instead of criticizing Paul, it is crucial to consider the context in which he made those statements. He was using an existing Jewish law on remarriage to illustrate how believers in Christ are released from previous marital commitments.⁴⁷

Chōrizetō

The last principle is the phrase, “Let not man put asunder” (KJV - Matt. 19:6; Mk 10:9). The Greek word used for “asunder” in the text is *chōrizetō* which is a conjugated form of the verb *chōrizō* and it literally means to “separate, divide.”⁴⁸ It is the third-person singular form in the past tense, indicating that someone or something was separating or being divided in the past. Jesus’ use of this term emphasizes the sacredness and permanence of the marital bond. In contrast to his Jewish contemporaries, Jesus expressed his strong opposition to divorce. Along with the previously discussed phrase “joined together”, he used a stronger word to discourage those who favored divorce from allowing it. By using the Greek word *chōrizetō* as an imperative form of *chōrizō*, Jesus seems to suggest that no one has the authority to dissolve what God Himself has designed and united. Therefore, Jesus, with the original plan of marriage in mind, suggests that divorce should not exist in marriage. In essence, the word

⁴⁶ Kramer, ‘Musterion’ in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerald Schneider (eds.), (Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, 1990), Accessed: 16th August 2023.

⁴⁷ Adam. *Clarke’s Commentary: Matthew – Luke*.

⁴⁸ Vine, ‘An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words’ 32. See also J. B. Bauer, ‘Chorizo’ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerald Schneider (eds.), (Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company Grand Rapids, 1990), Accessed: 16th August 2023.

chōrizetō reinforces the idea that the union between husband and wife should be respected and preserved, recognizing it as a bond created and blessed by God.

The Twi text translates *chōrizetō* as *nntete mu* which according to Christaller is defined as “*disruption, rent, separation, disunion, discord...*”⁴⁹ Thus, *nntete* generally can be used to describe a situation or condition where something is divided into distinct parts or when individuals or groups are physically or emotionally separated. Again, reflecting on Christaller’s use of those terms in defining *nntete*, it can be deduced that *nntete* represents a state of unrest or disharmony within the Akan community. It could refer to situations where there is a lack of cohesion, conflicts, or any factors that lead to a sense of division or disagreement. As has already been highlighted, the Akan culture places a strong emphasis on the preservation of marriage, and divorce is traditionally discouraged. The Akan understanding of marriage revolves around concepts such as *nkabom* (cooperation, togetherness), and the formation of a family unit. While challenges and disagreements can occur within marriage, the focus is typically on resolving conflicts and maintaining harmony rather than *nntete mu* or encouraging separation. Thus, the principle Jesus appears to be putting across here may resonate well with the Akan as their concept of *nntete mu* in marriage would typically be seen as a last resort rather than an ideal solution.

It has been suggested that women were divorced for trivial reasons. This does not come as a surprise because the situation has not improved in a society like Ghana. Sometimes, women are unfairly blamed for the problems men face, such as impotence, loss of job, financial crises, etc. Some wives are brutally mistreated because their husbands become infatuated with other women. Christians are encouraged to take inspiration from God’s unconditional love, even though we do not deserve it (Jhn 3:16).

RECOMMENDATION

It is fundamentally wrong to perpetuate the idea that women are subordinate to men. Thus, the researcher recommends that Christian couples allow God to guide them in building relationships based on equality and fairness. Contrary to popular belief, marriage is not a trap that limits freedom, but a divine institution that allows couples to express their humanity and spirituality. There is a need to change the mindset towards marriage and make necessary adjustments to ensure it reflects Christ’s teachings.

The researcher further recommends that the Church should take the necessary steps to properly prepare Christian couples before they enter into marriage. The Church should not avoid discussing relevant subjects related to marriage, whether from its pulpit or any other platforms it employs to engage with the wider society. When Christian couples are acquainted with the actualities of marriage and are willing to work hard at resolving problems, they will be able to experience a lifetime of love, happiness, prosperity, and longevity.

CONCLUSION

In this article, the researcher sought to examine the topics of marriage, divorce, and remarriage by exploring the key principles and values that Jesus presents in Matthew 19:3-12 and Mark 10:2-12. The study focused on four Greek words namely, *kataleipō*, *proskollaō*, *suzeugnumi*, and *chōrizō* that are believed to revolve around the principles of Christ regarding the institution of marriage. The discussion revealed that the principles highlighted by Christ are still relevant in today’s world, just as they were during His time. These important values are discussed in a much simpler manner, not just within the original Jewish setting, but also within the Akan cultural context. The interaction between the biblical perspective and the Akan context helps to appreciate and value the principles that Christ puts forward regarding marriage. The study makes it clear that marriage is a sacred institution and should be handled in a way that gives glory to God. From the research, it is evident that marriage should be between one man and one woman who are naturally and exclusively dedicated to each other as long they both live. Thus, marriage is a long-lasting institution and it is only death that can separate a couple. Divorce, as

⁴⁹ Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi)*, 507.

has already been observed, is only permitted in cases of marital infidelity. Remarrying, except there is infidelity involved, amounted to adultery. The teachings given by Christ in the selected passages of Matthew and Mark provide an ethical basis for marriage in any society around the world. By embracing Christ's values, Christians can foster harmony and prevent unnecessary friction. Ultimately, Christian marriages can serve as a reflection of Christ's glory to the world.

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