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Appendix 7b: The Certificate of Divorce — Truths and Myths

This page is part of the series on the unions God accepts and follows this sequence:

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The “certificate of divorce” mentioned in the Bible is often misunderstood as a divine authorization to dissolve marriages and allow new unions. This article clarifies the true meaning of [סֵפֶר כְּרִיתוּת] (sefer keritut)] in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 and [βιβλίον ἀποστασίου (biblîon apostasíou)] in Matthew 5:31, refuting false teachings that suggest the dismissed woman is free to marry again. Based on Scripture, we show that this practice, tolerated by Moses due to the hardness of human hearts, was never a commandment from God. This analysis highlights that, according to God, marriage is a spiritual union binding the woman to her husband until his death, and the “certificate of divorce” does not dissolve this bond, keeping the woman bound while he lives.

QUESTION: *What is the certificate of divorce mentioned in the Bible?*

ANSWER: Let it be clear that, contrary to what most Jewish and Christian leaders teach, there is no divine instruction about such a “certificate of divorce” — much less the idea that the woman who receives it is free to enter a new marriage.

Moses mentions the “certificate of divorce” only as part of an illustration in Deuteronomy 24:1–4, with the purpose of leading to the real command contained in the passage: ***the prohibition for the first husband to lie again with his former wife if she has lain with another man*** (see Jeremiah 3:1).

Incidentally, the first husband could even take her back — but could no longer have relations with her, as we see in the case of David and the concubines violated by Absalom (2 Samuel 20:3).

The main evidence that Moses is only illustrating a situation is the repetition of the conjunction כִּי (ki, “if”) in the text: **If** a man takes a wife... **If** he finds something indecent [עֶרְוָה, **ervah**, “nakedness”] in her... **If** the second husband dies... Moses builds a possible scenario as a rhetorical device.

Jesus made it clear that Moses **did not forbid** divorce, but that does not mean the passage is a formal authorization. In fact, there is no passage where Moses **authorizes** divorce. He merely took a passive stance in the face of the hardness of the people’s hearts — a people who had just come out of about 400 years of slavery.

This mistaken understanding of Deuteronomy 24 is very old. In the days of Jesus, [Rabbi Hillel](#) and his followers also extracted from this passage something that is not there: the idea that a man could send his wife away for any reason. (What does “nakedness” עֶרְוָה have to do with “any reason”?)

Jesus then corrected these errors:

1. He emphasized that πορνεία (**porneía** — something indecent) is the only acceptable reason.
2. He made it clear that Moses merely tolerated what they were doing to women because of the hardness of the hearts of the men of Israel.
3. In the Sermon on the Mount, when mentioning the “certificate of divorce” and concluding with the expression “But I say to you,” Jesus prohibited the use of this legal instrument for the separation of souls (Matthew 5:31–32).

NOTE: The Greek word πορνεία (*porneía*) is equivalent to the Hebrew עֶרְוָה (*ervah*). In Hebrew it meant “nakedness,” and in Greek it was broadened to “something indecent.” *Porneía* does not include adultery [μοιχεία (*moicheía*)] because in biblical times the penalty was death. In Matthew 5:32, Jesus used both words in the same sentence, indicating they are two different things.

It is important to stress that if Moses taught nothing about divorce, it is because God did not instruct him to do so — after all, Moses was faithful and spoke only what he heard from God.

The expression **sefer keritut**, which literally means “book of separation” or “certificate of divorce,” appears only once in the entire Torah — precisely in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. In other words, nowhere did Moses teach that men should use this certificate to send their wives away. This indicates it was **an already existing practice**, inherited from the period of captivity in Egypt. Moses merely mentioned something that was already done, but did not instruct it as a divine command. It is worth remembering that Moses himself, about forty years earlier, had lived in Egypt and certainly knew of this type of legal instrument.

Outside the Torah, the Tanakh also uses **sefer keritut** only twice — both metaphorically, referring to the relationship between God and Israel (Jeremiah 3:8 and Isaiah 50:1).

In these two symbolic uses, there is no indication that because God gave a “certificate of divorce” to Israel, the nation was free to join itself to other gods. On the contrary, spiritual betrayal is condemned throughout the text. In other words, **not even symbolically does this “certificate of divorce” allow a new union for the woman.**

Jesus also never recognized this certificate as something authorized by God to legalize the separation between souls. The two times it appears in the Gospels are in Matthew — and once in the parallel in Mark (Mark 10:4):

1. Matthew 19:7–8: the Pharisees mention it, and Jesus replies that Moses only permitted (**epétrepse**n) the use of the certificate because of the hardness of their hearts — meaning it was not God’s command.

2. Matthew 5:31–32, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says:

“It was said: ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for the cause of **porneía**, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman **commits adultery.**”

Therefore, this so-called “certificate of divorce” was never a divine authorization, but merely something Moses tolerated in view of the people’s hardness of heart. No part of Scripture supports the idea that, by receiving this certificate, the woman would be spiritually released and free to unite with another man. This idea has no basis in the Word and is a myth. The clear and direct teaching of Jesus confirms this truth.