

# Of Eunuchs and Predators: Matthew 19:1–12 in a Cultural Context

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Abstract

Matthew 19:1–12 presents a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the conditions under which a married man might divorce his wife. In this essay, I hold the view that the point at issue is less one of divorce and more one of a contrast between two forms of husband–wife relationship within a marriage: one, the traditional form maintained by the patriarchal system represented by the Pharisees; and the other, an alternative form that Jesus proposes to his disciples. This latter view derives from the values of the forthcoming kingdom, values that are quite different from those of the patriarchal system. Divorce is presented as one of several forms of relationship that are exemplified or defined here. That is why Jesus moved on from the question of divorce to a lesson on husband–wife relationships. The consequences of these alternative relationships are alluded to, principally for male disciples. In the cultural context of the period, male honor depended, among other things, on the type of relations men might have with their wives, something that was defined by the general code for masculinity: dominance, aggressiveness, and demandingness. Deviations from the male role would lead to doubts about an individual's “manliness” and even to his “symbolic castration,” and thus dishonor. In my opinion, this is what is depicted in Jesus' final paradoxical words (vv 10–12).

## Text Analysis

One of the first problems posed by the passage is its limits. While its beginning is clear, where does it end, at verse 9, 12 or 15?

The phrase “And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these sayings,” and the geographical change of setting mark the beginning of the passage (v 1). A change of place again occurs in v 15, apparently signalling the end of the passage. However, the adverb (*tóte*) and change of action in v 13 seem to indicate some kind of change which suggests at least a different setting, albeit linked to the previous one by way of concluding proof. There appears to be no doubt that vv 1–12 go together, as we will see below.

In the early days of the historical-critical method it was claimed that vv 1–9 and 10–12 should be separated. Yet today, very few authors are of the opinion that vv 10–12 trace back to a different time period. Some reasons why these verses are considered part of the previous verses include: the vocabulary which is the same throughout; the obvious connection to Jesus' teachings in the previous verses; and the common literary technique of the disciples' misunderstanding (Carter 1994:69). The theme of vv 10–12

continues the central theme of Jesus' teaching about a husband's attitude towards his wife in marriage. The disciples' observation: “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry” (v 10) could not be understood if we did not take the previous verses into account, and more importantly, what Jesus had just said (v 9). Therefore, vv 10–12 continue addressing the same problem raised in vv 3–9: the relations between husband and wife within marriage (Carter 2000: 382–84; 1994: 69–70; Barton 1994: 194–96; Quesnel). Resolving the issue of whether or not the statement in v 12 was once an autonomous *logion*—as

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some authors argued—is not a determining factor for determining the meaning of the passage.

Just as in Mark, the context in which this passage is found is one of Jesus' teaching about attitudes and values proper to the forthcoming kingdom of God in which the disciples will live. But Matthew further underscores this teaching, as chapters 18, the remainder of 19, and chapter 20 deal with the same topic: values which contrast with those of the patriarchal society of the time, and more precisely, with extant patriarchal expectations concerning relations among members of the household (see Carter 1994, who believes these chapters are to be understood against patriarchal household theory).

In comparison with Mark, the following Matthean features should be noted:

- Matthew emphasizes the teaching of alternative values throughout this context.
- the controversy moves along as the Pharisees ask Jesus two questions, each of which receive a “teaching response.” The first response introduces the Creator's original intention for women and men in marriage (going beyond the scope of the Pharisees' question), and the second response refers to the saying that divorce is equal to adultery, both continuing the same theme of alternative relationships.
- Jesus' words on divorce appear in other parts of the Synoptics. The usual analysis postulates the existence of two sources: Q (Matt 5, 32–32; Lk 16) and Mk 10, 1–12. Matthew follows Mark here from 19:9 on and adds the clause “except it be for *porneia*.” This insert was prepared for by Matthew's addition “for any cause” (v 3) at the outset. It reinforces the idea that there was a discussion about two different ways of reading the Scriptures in order to discover the will of God. This in turn points to some underlying problems in Matthew's community and to two different hermeneutical perspectives.

The last three verses (vv 10–12) of this passage, consisting of a paradoxical statement and a saying, offer an in-depth conclusion to what preceded, initiated by the literary technique of the disciples' misunderstanding. In v 10, the sentence: “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry,” represents a typical outlook of the patriarchal system in which males stand in a relationship of dominance, power and use toward women. With his teaching, Jesus challenges this position. I believe the passage refers, not to divorce only, but (as the whole context indicates) to all the types of relations that made divorce possible. When Jesus says in v 11: “All men cannot receive this saying . . . ,” he is not agreeing with the disciples and their androcentric patriarchal position. “This saying” does not refer to that of the disciples but to the teach-

ing of Jesus concerning this matter. The sentence about eunuchs summarizes the foregoing teaching in an aphorism. Yet it is clear that it is about men and women experiencing different kinds of relations in matrimony. These would be counter-cultural relations that would attach a stigma to the male disciples and dishonor them in the eyes of their neighbors. The key is in the image of the eunuch. And only by taking into account the values shared by Matthew's contemporaries can we understand the meaning of the passage in a way that respects its intent and does not distort or contradict it.

### Socio-cultural Context: Setting the Scenario

Anthropological studies have discovered that in the classical Mediterranean, despite local differences, there existed some widely shared values and perceptions through which reality was interpreted. Among these was a common form of understanding masculinity which can be verified in ancient Greco-Roman literature and can still be found sporadically in modern Mediterranean populations.

I consider the following features to be of interest for our consideration.

- Honor as a central value in an agonistic society. Matthew, and in fact Jesus of Nazareth, belonged to a collectivistic society (one more oriented towards groups than individuals), where honor represented the central value. Honor can be defined as a claim to worth that is acknowledged by others. Both one's self estimation and the positive judgment of others are essential; a man's worth or goodness had to be socially judged and acknowledged. Men might be endowed with honor by belonging to a particular family or be given a notable grant of honor by some socially superior persons (ascribed honor). They could gain honor themselves through various feats of courage or by being victorious in the challenge–riposte games that were always taking place among men. As with most everything else, one man's gain of honor meant another's loss and vice-versa. Loss of honor happened for various reasons, one of which was a man's not behaving in a way expected of a man. As we shall see, this included certain ways in which a man was expected to behave toward women (Malina: 28–54).

Among the characteristics which made up masculinity, “what made a man to be a man,” that is, the standard of male behavior, what is of interest to us here are the following:

- A real man—as is still said today: “un hombre como Dios manda” (literally, “A man just as God ordered”)—should spend little time at home, just enough to eat and sleep. He should be in his own space, in public,

with his peers, making and accepting challenges and ripostes with other men where he could be seen and assessed according to the usual criteria (Brandes: 218). Cohen (72–73) writes:

In Athens, a wide variety of offenses brought some degree or another of loss of civic rights (*atimía*, literally, the state of being without honor). In Athens, then, as in many modern Mediterranean communities, to be shut out of the public space where men gather, whether by force of law or a public opinion, eliminates the possibility of maintaining one's standing in the eyes of the community, and marks one with the dishonor. In both of these social worlds men must continuously inhabit the appropriate public places to preserve or enhance their reputations.

If I may provide some personal experiences, my grandfather never carried a bag or a child in his arms when he could be seen by the neighbors because, he said, "these are women's things and it is shameful for a man." And I remember that when I was a child the habitual behavior of working class men after work was to spend most of the time outside the home, in the local bar, with peers.

So it is not very surprising to discover that several passages in Aristotle, Xenophon and others allude to this sort of behavior when they describe the government of the *polis* or *oikia*. Spending too much time at home in the company of women without participating in the tests of virility and challenges to honor were characteristics of dishonor, even of deviant behavior:

I believe that the god arranged that the work and supervision indoors are a woman's task, and outdoors are the man's . . . and it is more disgraceful for a man to remain inside than to take care of work outside. If anyone does something contrary to the nature god gave him, it is quite possible that of the gods and that he will pay the penalty for ignoring his proper work or doing a woman's work [Xenophon, OECONOMICUS 7.22;30–31].

Men had to be brave and prove their bravery or "manliness." This was understood as the ability to face up to difficult situations, such as defending one's wife, children and relatives against attacks from other men, usually regarded as predators. If a man could not or did not know how to defend his own, especially his wife, against other men, his honor was inevitably stained or damaged. This is what happens in cases of adultery. The story of Lucretia, told by Titus Livy (HISTORY OF ROME, 1.57.6–58), is clearly illustrative of this point. The same can be said of Israelite tradition (see the laws in Deuteronomy 22 and the difference

between the penalties for rape and adultery). In the case of adultery, the offence is against a male's honor; the action ridicules him, his property is attacked. This idea is quite ancient, traceable to as early as 1250 BCE in Middle Assyrian law (cf. Lerner: 134–35). Of course the sentiment has continued up to the present. It is important to take note of the fact that sexual exclusiveness is demanded only of the wife, never of the husband, who was free to sleep with other women. Therefore, adultery was always committed against the husband, never against the wife. Lerner (134) cites Middle Assyrian Law par. 40, which reads as follows:

Neither [wives] of [seigniors] nor [widows] nor [Assyrian women] who go out on the street may have their heads uncovered. The daughters of a seignior . . . whether it is with a shawl or a robe or [a mantle], must veil themselves. . . . when they go out on the street alone, they must veil themselves. A concubine who goes out on the street with her mistress must veil herself. A sacred prostitute whom a man married must veil herself on the street, but one whom a man did not marry must have her head uncovered on the street; she must not veil herself. A harlot must not veil herself; her head must be uncovered. . . .

Lerner (135) notes that a little later, the law states:

"He who has seen a harlot veiled must arrest her, produce witnesses [and] bring her to the palace tribunal; they shall not take her jewelry away [but] the one who arrested her may take her clothing; they shall flog her fifty [times] with staves [and] pour pitch on her head." . . . The law goes on to specify the punishment for a slave girl who is caught wearing a veil: she shall have her clothes taken away and have her ears cut off.

This characteristic of "manliness" was rooted in male biology: the testicles (Malina: 49; Brandes: 230–31). This feature has remained with us up to the present day in the language of ordinary people. Being a man means "*tener cojones*" (having "balls" or testicles), and the behavior of animals is alleged as proof. Castrated animals do not attack others and are called "tame" or "docile" (Gilmore: 96). Until quite recently (today it is considered vulgar, even if popular), should a man avoid accepting a challenge or attempt to impose himself on others, people would say he's "got no balls." Even though people did not really believe the person in question lacked this part of his anatomy, he was symbolically castrated (Brandes: 232; Gilmore: 87–88). On the contrary, "being very manly" was expressed as "having lots of balls") or "having them well

placed.” It was understood that such a man should be, and in fact was, respected by others as he deserved (Pitt-Rivers:118).

If being dependent at all damaged male honor, being dependent on one’s wife was even more serious. Therefore, a man was always suspicious of woman and had to be on the lookout for any traps she might use to ensnare him and have him deviate from his magnificent destiny of battles and challenges. Consider the sirens or Circe with Odysseus, or Dido with Aeneas:

[G]ood Aeneas, though longing to soothe and assuage Dido’s grief and by his words turn aside her sorrow, with many a sigh, his soul shaken by his mighty love, yet fulfils the gods’ bidding and returns to the fleet. [Virgil, AENEID, IV.—Loeb, 340–96].

The male had to be domineering, imposing, and always taking the initiative. Otherwise, doubts about his virility would spread among his peers. Until recently, it was said that such a man was “weak” or “cowardly” and “dominated by women.” A man had to be seen as being assertive, domineering and always in charge of his relations with women. The latter were expected to be submissive to him who was the “strong man,” who imposed his will and ways at home, and in public showed who was the boss. Not long ago, people still expressed this by claiming or denying that the man was “the one who wore the trousers.” This is the patriarchal model. He who did not play his role in his erotic or family life had his virility questioned by his peers and led them to believe he was effeminate or castrated. Not so long ago, it was said that a man who did not dominate and control his wife was “a coward,” a “henpecked husband,” somebody “dominated by his wife,” who “lacked what he should have,” or was “a kitchen-lover” or “a man who wears an apron.” Street language is graphic; it is full of expressions describing men who did not live up to the expectations of male behavior regarding women. Other males, unable to accept such “deviance,” stigmatized the person who broke the rules with symbolic castration and suitable epithets (Gilmore 1990: 55).

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Jesus’ argument is not from the law of Deuteronomy, but from Genesis, from “what has to be.”

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Relations within the patriarchal family specified that marriage was a contract between the honor of two families

that committed the families to fulfilling their side of that contract: the wife had to be both a virgin and fertile, so that she could provide the patriarchal lineage with descendants; the husband had to see to the basic physical needs of the wife and look after her. It was easier for the husband to breach the contract than the wife (Malina:126–29).

The wife left her home for her husband’s, and had to give birth to sons for his lineage. Yet she was always a stranger in his house. The blood link was the strongest feature, and her only duty was to be loyal. The husband was bound to his father through obedience and submission until the latter died, and would then take his place in the patrilineage at his burial. The husband’s closest emotional relationship was the one he had with his mother; it would never fade and was more important than his relationship with his wife. The mother was held in higher esteem than the wife (Lacoste-Dujardin). Plutarch wrote, regarding these difficult relations:

A wife ought to take cognizance of the hostility [of the mother-in-law] and try to cure the cause of it, which is the mother’s jealousy of the bride as the object of her son’s affection. . . . Mothers appear to have a great love for their sons because of feeling that their sons are able to help them [Advice to Bride and Groom, MORALIA—Loeb 143B].

Husband and wife spent little time together. Women from the peasantry were not confined to the house, as they had outdoor tasks to carry out, such as fetching water, attending the oven, and washing clothes. Furthermore, they also used to help out in the fields. Even so, there was still a separation of space which was respected, although there were no walls. There were spaces for men and others for women, and the spaces that were shared (springs, wells) had timetables according to gender. Each had their spaces and specific duties; the survival of the patriarchal lineage was of greater significance than the welfare of the individual.

### Text Interpretation

As can be seen from the above analysis, two types of relationship between men and women are set out in this Matthean passage. The first is the traditional one, represented by the Pharisees, which declares that men have power over women and that the patriarchal household—its structure and survival—is of greater importance than its individual members. The second is the alternative proposed by Jesus, deriving from another set of values characteristic of the forthcoming Kingdom, the topic of this whole section.

Jesus bases his stance on a reading of Israel's scriptures. His argument is not from the law of Deuteronomy cited by the Pharisees, but from Genesis. In other words, he argues his position, not from norms given at a specific time in Israel's history, but from the record of human origins, from the beginning, from "what has to be." He does not take on the casuistry of the prevailing schools of thought, which shared a common, taken-for-granted starting point: inequality, submission, the power of men over women, and the supremacy of the interests of the patriarchal household. Rather, Jesus goes to the heart of the matter and criticizes these schools basing his opinion on what he understands as being the intention of the Creator (Genesis). In this way the question of divorce serves as a springboard for a teaching about husband-wife relations broader than the question about the causes of divorce itself. Jesus does not make a new law, nor does he provide a halakic development of a previous tradition. Instead he just speaks about ideals and principles. It is Matthew who introduces the clause, "except it be for *porneia*." This exceptive clause was already prepared for at the beginning of the passage by the author's expanding the Pharisees' question to include "any reason." It is quite likely that we are here dealing with a situation concerning the community for which Matthew is applying these principles of Jesus—as Paul had done previously in 1 Corinthians 7.

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and be joined to his wife: and the two shall be one flesh" (Matt 19:5). Given the structure of the patriarchal household and the relations involved within it, Jesus' proposal is of a highly subversive nature and would be extremely demanding for men. Leaving one's parents in order to join one's wife means putting her and that relationship before one's duties to parents and lineage. The reference to mother and father underscore this. As previously noted, the father was the ultimate representative of the family. The son owed him obedience till his death. The mother was the son's main emotional and existential referent, the one with whom she had the closest, most intense and permanent relationship. It is not the first time that Jesus asks for something of this kind. The same idea is included in his request to put the Kingdom's discipleship and experience (Matt 8: 21–22) ahead of burying one's father (which is when the change of control took place in the patriarchal household). Therefore, what is stated here is that a man's relationship with the wife comes before the other two and the interests of the patriarchal household. The loyalty that this relationship entails, and to which husband and wife were obliged, is of greater importance than blood ties and patriarchal lineage. The controversy arising from this position promptly appears in Matthew 10:35–36, where the house-

hold structure, vertical and hierarchical, produces a cleavage between fathers and sons.

The outcome of such behavior would be expulsion from the family and the family home. The result would be a loss of honor in the eyes of others for being expelled and for not abiding by the generally accepted model of masculinity (Neyrey: 214–16). Jesus encourages a form of behavior that, particularly for men, implied challenging conduct established as honorable so as to adopt another regarded as dishonorable. Jesus asks them to abandon their "honor games" which were won at the expense of others and to promise their honor to the heavenly Father (Neyrey: chapters 8–9).

The quotes from Genesis chosen by Jesus are of great significance. Although barrenness was one of the clearest motives for divorce, Jesus does not allude to the passage in which procreation appears. In spite of the fact that patriarchal ideology, a good example of which can be found in classical literature, theorizes about the weakness and inferiority of women and the need for them to be submissive to men, Jesus refers to Genesis 1:27, where the equality of both is based on their being created in the image of God. He also alludes to Genesis 2:24, which puts the husband-wife relationship above the interests of the patriarchal household, and thus is of greater importance than bloodlines. The concluding sentence, "what God has joined," underlines this intention of the Creator.

The Pharisees' question is asked from a male-centered perspective, as it takes only a male's behavior into account and does not mention the possibility of a woman initiating divorce proceedings (Carter 1994: 59–60). Hellenistic women in fact could do so, and there were even some situations in which Israelite women in Palestine asked for a divorce. Jesus' response answers this perspective and is aimed at men. Nevertheless, his perspective is not male-centered but takes women into consideration, since his way of thinking contemplates and condemns the negative consequences that such patriarchal norms and structures have for them. It was a man's duty to leave his wife if she were sterile, and he could also do so to gain honor or improve his position (Hanson). But the woman who had been rejected had a stigma attached to her.

The same criticism of the traditional vision provided by patriarchal ideology comes through in the association of divorce with adultery: "And I say unto you, whosoever shall put away his wife and shall marry another, commits adultery" (v 9). This saying was directed at the common male practice of adultery and subsequent marriage, neither of which took the wife into consideration. As said before, adultery could be committed only against the husband. Sexual exclusiveness was demanded of the wife but not the hus-

band. Married males could sleep with prostitutes, spinsters and concubines without it being considered adultery. Jesus' reply turns this traditional conception on its head as it means that it is the husband who commits adultery against his wife if he divorces her to marry another woman. It should be pointed out that, at this point, Matthew does not say whether the latter was married before or not, as does Q.

Jesus' response reorients the wife's status because it places her above the mother in importance. It also specifies that the marital relationship with and loyalty to the wife are more important than loyalty to the household and the interests of patriarchal lineage, and it serves as a reminder of the masculine attitudes of dominance and arrogance, which were considered normal and favored by patriarchal society. I believe it is of interest here to underscore the consequences of Jesus' teaching, notably the liberation it brought, not only for women, but also for men. It was mainly women, though, who suffered the consequences of the traditional view of marriage along with the relations of male dominance and female subordination with the circumscribing of the wife's role to means for generating patrilineal descendants. Jesus' proposal of a marriage relation entailing mutual loyalty, emotional support and equality would have brought about great social change, even if it was not a totally novel idea at the time since several authors had spoken of enhancing cordiality between husband and wife. There had also been religious and social movements (Isis cult groups, for example) that recommended greater equality between husbands and wives.

The disciples' answer here is a rhetorical question which allows for going deeper into Jesus' teaching. It represents the traditional position, the typical mentality and stance of a male who thinks and reasons according to the values and attitudes belonging to the patriarchal system. If a male had to give up his privileges; if loyalty should have to be mutual; if having the type of relation Jesus proposed might result in men losing the honor and respect of other men and could even cause problems in the family, then it would be better not to marry and enter into such a relationship with a female.

Jesus' second answer and the saying about eunuchs both stress and reaffirm his previous teaching that moves against the traditional stance displayed by his disciples. Jesus' statement, "Not all men can understand this statement," clearly refers to what Jesus previously stated, not to what the disciples said. The point is to comprehend and realize that the type of husband–wife relation that Jesus proposed cannot be produced on the basis of the general code of honor and shame, the traditional role of masculinity, or the male–female relation rooted in the patriarchal system. To understand this teaching and put it into prac-

tice, one would have to alter one's mentality in line with the values of the forthcoming kingdom. Such a change of viewpoint would have to be accepted as a gift. "Not all men can understand this statement" refers not only to the saying about divorce, as most commentators believe, but also to all of Jesus' previous teaching about marital relations and their consequences. This is what made the disciples anxious.

We have seen that if a male did not comply with the normal behavioral patterns generally expected from a male "as God wills" (general code), he could be denied those physical organs (by symbolic castration) in which his virility presumably lies. I believe that the saying about the eunuch has to be interpreted from this point of view. If a husband were to treat his wife in the way Jesus proposed, establishing a relationship of reciprocity, mutual loyalty and non-dominance, this would surely raise doubts about his virility and cause a loss of honor. It should be remembered that eunuchs were without honor. They could not challenge other men, and they did not pose a threat to women. They did not have an aggressive or assertive attitude towards them either. They moved around within their own environment and were likened to women.

In the argument that Jesus has with the Pharisees here, Barton (194) discovers an echo of the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:22, 28, 32, 39, 44). In these passages, Neyrey too believes Jesus asks his disciples to relinquish certain behaviors and interactions used to gain honor in the eyes of others. If they did adopt Jesus' views, they would certainly be expelled from their families with a consequent loss of honor and means of subsistence. He did the same in Matthew 6:1–18, where he asks his disciples to carry out works of mercy (prayer, fasting, alms) away from the public gaze. In the face of the social dishonor and stigmatization such behavior entailed, Jesus promised them an increase in honor in the eyes of their heavenly Father (Neyrey: 214–16).

This being the case, Jesus' request of his disciples to adopt an alternative view of marital relations, one which differed from the traditional patriarchal household ("deviating" from social norms), would have ramifications that affect relations with other men as well. It would entail giving up customary interactions of honor, giving up the locales where such interactions took place, and avoiding many of the behavioral patterns needed to achieve honor. All of this represents a stigma, with doubts about a male's virility stemming from the general code of masculinity. As a consequence, it would be no surprise if disciples were called "eunuchs," if, that is, their masculinity was impugned and was symbolically denied to them. However, this was not because they refused to take a wife—nobody

called Qumran's men eunuchs, nor were they stigmatized. It was because, at the request of Jesus, they established another kind of marital relationship, one that formed part of this alternative and "shameful" (in the eyes of other men) line of conduct and underlying attitude. Accepting the values befitting the forthcoming Kingdom and the type of relations they entailed meant that, though stigmatized by others, yet they were honored in the eyes of God.

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