

Marriage Infidelity as Infidelity to God: Applying Malachi 2:10–16 in Marriage Counseling Marriages

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Abstract

Malachi 2:10–16 presents marital infidelity as simultaneous breaking of a human covenant and a violation of the covenant with Yahweh. This article examines dual covenantal logic through grammatical-historical exegesis before drawing out its implications for pastoral counseling on marital infidelity in the African context. The prophet Malachi confronts the men of post-exilic Judah who had broken faith by marrying “the daughter of a foreign god” and by being faithless to “the wife of their youth.” Malachi frames this horizontal betrayal as vertical treachery, a violation of the covenant with Yahweh himself. The article argues that this covenantal framework, in which marital faithfulness images divine-human fidelity and vice versa, provides an important theological foundation for marriage counseling that addresses both the relational wound and its spiritual dimensions. The study employs a grammatical-historical exegesis of the Hebrew text, with particular attention to *bērît* (covenant) terminology and the striking declaration that Yahweh ‘hates divorce’ (v. 16), or, more precisely, the abandonment of one’s wife. The article proposes a counseling framework that integrates the text’s theological emphases: God as witness to marriage, the pursuit of godly offspring, and the call to guard one’s spirit, with culturally appropriate pastoral interventions. It concludes that Malachi’s indictment on the correlation between the covenant with Yahweh and the covenant within marriage offers African Christian couples both a prophetic call against infidelity and a redemptive pathway toward reconciliation, healing, and faithfulness.

Keywords: Marriage Covenant, Infidelity, Divorce, Biblical Marriage, Pastoral Marriage Counseling

Introduction

Marital infidelity is one of the most painful realities confronting pastors across sub-Saharan Africa today. Pastoral counseling on marital issues is rarely purely relational because it affects finances and children’s futures, strains communities, and erodes the church’s long-term capacity to function as a place of trust. In Kenya specifically, the Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) 2022 records that 7.9% of married women aged 15–49 are separated (Table 6.1); according to the KNBS



Vital Statistics Report 2024, divorce and separation rates have more than doubled since 1989.¹ Infidelity remains the leading driver of marital breakdown among many marriages; a study of 140 married couples in mainstream churches in Kikuyu constituency, Kiambu County, found that “99% of respondents agreed that infidelity was present in their church.”² The question facing the African pastor is not merely how to help couples survive the immediate crisis, but where, theologically, to stand while doing so.

Malachi 2:10–16 offers a theologically emphatic answer to that question. While acknowledging that the passage is among the most difficult to translate, it contains the most sustained engagement with marriage in the entire Old Testament.³ In Malachi, God is indicting His people for breaking the covenant with Him; their treachery in their marriage union is a symptom of that deep spiritual drift. The marriage union is the space where that unfaithfulness is displayed. As Hill notes regarding Malachi’s message, “Malachi pivots on the theme of faithfulness versus faithlessness as mirrored in the marriage and divorce customs of post-exilic Judah.”⁴ In particular, Malachi 2:10–16 highlights unfaithfulness in the context of marriage. Achtemeier captures its significance, stating that “the passage constitutes one of the most sublime understandings of the marital relation to be found in the Old Testament—an understanding consonant with the view of both Genesis 2:18–25 and of the New Testament (cf. Mark 10:1–12; Eph. 5:21–33).”⁵ What makes it theologically distinctive is not its coverage of marriage customs but its insistence that marital faithlessness and covenant treachery against Yahweh are, in the end, the same act. Infidelity is not merely a relational failure; it is, at root, a vertical failure: a breaking of a covenant sworn before God, who witnessed the covenant.

This article examines the passage exegetically before interrogating how it applies to specific challenges that shape marital breakdown in African Christian communities. These challenges include economic transactionalism, extended family pressure, and the cultural acceptance of male infidelity. A counseling framework is then proposed that takes Malachi’s

¹ Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), *Kenya Demographic and Health Survey 2022*, KNBS and ICF (Nairobi, Kenya and Rockville, Maryland, USA: ICF, 2023), <https://www.knbs.or.ke/reports/kdhs-2022/>; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, *Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, Kenya Vital Statistics Report 2024 (Nairobi: KNBS, 2025)*. Government Report (Nairobi: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2025), <https://www.knbs.or.ke>.

² V. N. Wanjiru, N. Ireri, and J. B. Menecha, ‘An Investigation of the Factors Contributing to Infidelity Among Married Couples in Selected Mainstream Churches in Kikuyu Constituency, Kiambu County, Kenya,’ *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Religious Studies* 2, no. 2 (November 2020): 1.

³ Gordon Paul Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi*, 1st pbk. ed, Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1998), 27.

⁴ Andrew E. Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 28 (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012), 327.

⁵ Elizabeth Rice Achtemeier, *Nahum - Malachi*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 2012), 197.



double-covenantal logic and faithlessness toward a spouse as faithlessness toward God as its organizing principle.

The methodology throughout is grammatical-historical exegesis combined with biblical-theological reflection and contextual application. The aim is to understand what this meant then and apply it well to the contemporary context. Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Grammatical-Historical Exegesis of Malachi 2:10–16

Historical and Canonical Context

Malachi most likely wrote in the mid-fifth century BCE, in the period bracketed by the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁶ The community he addressed had returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, only to slip quietly into faithlessness.⁷ The prophet's disputational style, raising a charge, preempting the objection, pressing the indictment home, creates something close to a legal atmosphere. In 2:10–16, the court convenes around the specific matter of marriage.

The literary unity of this pericope is secured by the Hebrew verb *bāgad* (“to deal treacherously”), which appears four times across the passage (in vv. 10, 11, 14, and 16),⁸ creating a tight *inclusio* around both the communal and the marital dimensions of the accusation. Whatever else shapes varying interpretations of this passage, the moral diagnosis is not in dispute: this is a community marked by betrayal, and Malachi wants them to see it that way.

The Divine Covenant (v. 10): One Father, One People

The rhetorical question that opens this portion, “Have we not all one Father?” The identity of the father in this verse has been a cause of debate over whether it refers to Yahweh, the divine Father, or to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel. Those who make a case for Abraham look back to the mention of Jacob; while that is not to be completely ignored, we agree that the context favors God as the Father. Verhoef argues “the synthetic parallelism of the first two sentences, and by the antithetical reference to the daughter of a foreign god (v. 11).”⁹ The question then is not a warm affirmation of community but is, in fact, a prosecutorial move. It is meant to point people to the heart of their unfaithfulness, which runs counter to their identity. What Malachi does is locate the

⁶ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 188–90; Ralph Lee Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary 32 (Waco, Tex: Word Books, 1984), 317.

⁷ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 33–35; W. Dennis Tucker, *Malachi: Fidelity to the Great King*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament / General Editor Daniel I. Block, volume 35 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 6–7.

⁸ Julia M. O'Brien, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2004), 271.

⁹ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 265.



community's ultimate accountability not in clan honor or social expectation, but in the character of the one Father who stands behind the covenant. If all Israel shares one divine Father and one creator, then any act of betrayal within the covenant community carries a corporate weight. The man who abandons his wife has not committed a private indiscretion; he has desecrated the covenant household to which they both belong.

Faithlessness in Intermarriage (vv. 11–12)

Verse 11 identifies the first form of faithlessness: Judahite men had “married the daughter of a foreign god” (Mal 2:11). The phrase is deliberately theological. Malachi is not legislating against interethnic unions.¹⁰ The danger is religious; these women are devotees of foreign deities, and the Deuteronomic warning (Deut 7:3–4) that such marriages would turn Israel's heart away from Yahweh had proven itself repeatedly in Israel's history, “through mixed marriages,” the way is opened for apostasy and idolatry.”¹¹ Paul's instruction in 2 Corinthians 6:14–15 expresses the same principle: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor 6:14–15, ESV). This is the New Testament equivalent of the Deuteronomic warning: covenant union with someone whose ultimate allegiance belongs elsewhere is not a private arrangement but a road to faithlessness. It will shape worship, children's discipleship, and the home's long-term orientation.

The economic logic behind such marriages should not be sentimentalized. Hill identifies the possible economic strains at the time, “the social ills confronted by Malachi were partially the result of the sheer pragmatism of the Jewish restoration community in response to the depressed local economy. Drought and blight had earlier affected agricultural production (cf. Hag. 1:11)”¹². As Verhoef paints the economic situation at the time, “the exorbitant profits of the rich, together with the compulsory contributions to the Persians for the waging of their wars, caused many to sink into poverty, to mortgage their property;—and to give their sons and daughters into slavery.”¹³ In that context, men were divorcing and intermarrying the foreign wives to gain some economic advantage as Hill further notes that Malachi's speech censuring divorce “was likely prompted by the actions of men divorcing their wives and marrying foreign women in order to gain access to local commerce by marrying into the trade guilds and business cartels.”¹⁴ Marriage to a woman with means or connections made economic sense, which is exactly what Malachi is not prepared

¹⁰ Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 82–84.

¹¹ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 272.

¹² Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 322.

¹³ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 161.

¹⁴ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 322.



to accept as a justification. In his view, the plausibility of the reason does not reduce the gravity of the betrayal. This economic dimension of the text will be further examined in the section below, with particular attention to its application to the contemporary African context.

Divorce and Betrayal (vv. 13–16)

The second display of faithlessness is the practice of divorcing Israelite wives. There are varying opinions regarding some aspects of verses 13–16, which require careful examination.¹⁵ Three exegetical matters deserve particular attention. First, v. 14 declares that Yahweh is “witness” to the marriage covenant. This language conveys the idea that God, by witnessing the marriage, was also its guarantor and judge. To divorce the wife of one’s youth, Tucker argues, is therefore not a matter between two private parties; it is to break a covenant whose third party is Yahweh himself. “Divorcing the ‘wife of their youth’ is not the issue; it is the symptom.”¹⁶

Another phrase is the designation of marriage as a covenant in verse 14. Some scholars hold that the covenant referred to here is the national covenant. In contrast, others, like Hugenberger, hold that it is the covenant between man and woman in marriage under God.¹⁷ Given the mention of marriage v.11, the daughter of a foreign god v.11, and also the mention of wife v.14 and children v.15, it leaves no doubt that marriage is in question here and that the covenant in view here is that of marriage in connection to the national covenant. Hugenberger defines a covenant as “an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath.”¹⁸ A solemn oath constitutes marriage, carries specific obligations, and is superintended by the divine witness. The contrast with a contractual model is clear: a contract dissolves when one party decides the exchange is no longer mutually beneficial. At the same time, a covenant is held together by fidelity to the one before whom it was sworn. As Taylor states, “not only does the Lord appear here in his role of Defender of the defenseless and Helper of the helpless, invisible but powerful witness of every injustice, but he also watches over covenants made before him and judges those who break vows.”¹⁹ Verhoef adds, “the Lord is the witness, guarantor, and protector of every legal transaction, and this includes the marriage “contract” (cf. Gen. 31:48-54).”²⁰

Lastly, the translation of verse 16 has generated significant scholarly debate. The traditional reading, “the Lord God of Israel says that he hates divorce” (NKJV), represents the

¹⁵ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 324; Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, The New American Commentary, v. 21A (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 390.

¹⁶ Tucker, *Malachi*, 107.

¹⁷ Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 175–215.

¹⁸ Hugenberger, 11.

¹⁹ Taylor and Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, 395.

²⁰ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 274.



first-person divine form. More recent translations shift to a third-person reading: “the man who hates and divorces his wife” (NIV, NLT). The syntactical ambiguity of *kī s̄ānē’ šallāḥ* is real; the word for a formal certificate of divorce *kēritūt* (כְּרִיתוּת) is the term used in Deut 24:1, Isaiah 50:1, and Jeremiah 3:8. That word does not appear in Malachi 2:16; instead, what Malachi uses is the verb *šallāḥ* (שָׁלַח), “to send away” or “to dismiss.” As Hill notes, this verb “the occurrence of the verbs to ‘hate’ and ‘send away’ in Deuteronomy 24:3 suggests that Malachi is alluding to the divorce statutes of the Mosaic law (Deut 24:1–4), and he is likely addressing abuses from the misapplication of the Mosaic divorce laws in post-exilic Judah.”²¹ The fact that Malachi uses *šallāḥ* rather than *kēritūt* means his indictment reaches beyond formal legal divorce to cover any act of marital abandonment. A wife sent away without a certificate of divorce could not remarry; she was left entirely exposed, which is precisely the violence Malachi names.

Jesus Christ, while answering the question of divorce in Matthew 19:1–9, pointed back to God’s creational norm in Genesis 2:24, concluding, “Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt 19:8, ESV). Jesus’s appeal to the creational norm rather than the Mosaic permission reinforces Malachi’s own insistence that the law’s divorce provisions represent a concession, not a commendation.

The image that closes verse 16, depicting the garment as violently covering, draws on its meaning as covenantal covering and protection.²² “The reference to the ‘garment’ is to the man’s symbolic act of spreading his garment over the woman as a sign of his choice of her, cf. Ruth 3:9; Ezek 16:8.”²³ The man who divorces his wife strips her of that covering; he leaves her economically and socially exposed. That Malachi calls this act ‘violence’ is deliberate; it refuses any reading of divorce as a neutral or merely administrative act.

The Dual-Covenantal Framework: Horizontal Betrayal as Vertical Treachery

The heart of Malachi 2:10-16, and the central claim of this article, is that marital infidelity is never only about the marriage. Every act of faithlessness between a husband and wife is simultaneously a betrayal of Yahweh, who was present at the covenant’s making and who holds its terms. This is the dual-covenantal structure of the passage: the horizontal and the vertical cannot be separated. Instone captures this well: “faithlessness in human covenants is used to illustrate faithlessness towards God’s covenant.”²⁴ This shows that one cannot repent of one without the other, and that

²¹ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 326.

²² Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, 322.

²³ Achtemeier, *Nahum - Malachi*, 197.

²⁴ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 58.



one has not yet uprooted the sin until they repent to God, to whom they have also broken the covenant.

God is described as a witness to this covenant. That is significant to this discussion, God is the enforcer of this covenant, Hill drawing from Stuart notes that, “the job of the covenant witness was that of an enforcer or guarantor, not simply a court witness who gives testimony at a trial: ‘A covenant witness was the third party who could and did make sure that the direct parties to the covenant kept its terms.’”²⁵ Yahweh, as the living guarantor of every marriage, has the authority to summon the parties involved. Taylor argues, “Since it involved breaking oaths sworn before the Lord, these men’s treatment of their wives was also another act by which Judah was defaming the God of Israel, like the insulting sacrifices described in 1:6–14.”²⁶ Breaking a horizontal covenant is also breaking the vertical covenant.

Recognizing this reframes the whole pastoral task. Where marriage is understood as a covenant before God, the primary question confronting the unfaithful spouse is not relational but theological; it is a reckoning with the God before whom the oath was sworn. David saw this clearly when he prayed after his adultery with Bathsheba: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Psalm 51:4, ESV). The same logic presses upon the counselor: the work is not merely to repair what has been broken between two people but to bring the one who has broken faith back into honest standing before the God who witnessed the covenant.

Godly Offspring (v. 15) and the Purpose of Faithful Marriage

Verse 15 introduces a dimension of the marriage covenant that is easily missed in crisis counseling: the matter of “godly offspring” or “seed of God.”²⁷ The phrase connects to the Genesis commission for humanity to fill the earth with God’s image-bearers. This idea of children or godly offspring is a special obligation by God to humans that goes beyond the general idea of multiplication: “along with the rest of human nature, God uses human sexuality to serve his redemptive purpose in the world.”²⁸ Marriage, in its covenant form, is not a private arrangement for the mutual happiness of two individuals. Rather it is one of the primary vehicles by which the knowledge of God is carried from one generation to the next through the bearing and nurturing of children in God, Verhoef asserts that for such a person in the community, “His marriage is one within “the covenant with the fathers” (v. 10), and serves to procreate citizens not only for the kingdom of Israel but above

²⁵ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 323.

²⁶ Taylor and Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, 395.

²⁷ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 278–80.

²⁸ Raymond C. Jr Ortlund, *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, v. Volume 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 16.



all for the kingdom of God.”²⁹ The children are God’s plan for his kingdom growth, as Hill concludes on godly offspring, “God is seeking faithful children: that is, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who love him, obey him and hold fast to him (Deut 30:19–20), and those who love justice, hate wrongdoing and act faithfully (Isa 61:8–9)”³⁰

The pastoral weight of this is heavy, and should be laid on the counseling table carefully rather than wielded as a threat. Children are among the most significant casualties of marital infidelity, not only when it ends in divorce, but also when it does not. Children who grow up in homes fractured by betrayal and concealment frequently carry distorted understandings of covenant faithfulness into their own adult relationships. The chain of faith transmission is broken not only by doctrine being untaught, but also by fidelity being modeled as optional and by infidelity being passed on to the next generation unless there is an intervention. There is a glimpse of hope in the godly offspring, Taylor reads this with a view of the future, “where a relational revival is predicted in the eschatological future, with “the hearts of the fathers” turning to their children and “the hearts of the children” turning to their fathers (4:6).”³¹ The Malachi’s repeated call to return and a promise of God’s acceptance of them rests not just on the present generation but also on the future of God’s people in their children turning to Him.

Theological Synthesis: Marriage as Sacred Covenant

Marriage and the Character of God

Malachi 2 does not stand in isolation. Across the prophetic corpus, Yahweh is consistently portrayed as husband to Israel, and Israel’s religious unfaithfulness is described in the language of marital betrayal, which means the reverse is also true: Israel’s marital betrayals are theological statements about the character of the God they claim to serve. As Ortlund observes, “For post-fall humanity, adulterated by sin, the Bible unfolds the drama of a loving God winning back to himself a pure bride for her one husband (2 Cor 11:2).”³² Hosea’s marriage to Gomer is not an unfortunate biographical detail but a prophetic pointer. Ezekiel 16 reads the entire history of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh as a marriage that Israel has continuously dishonored God. In Jeremiah 3, God reaches for the language of the Deuteronomic divorce law to describe the fracture Israel has caused.

The pastoral weight of this runs in a specific direction. When a couple sits with a pastor, their marriage is already a theological statement; it bears witness, one way or another, to the

²⁹ Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1987), 277.

³⁰ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 325.

³¹ Taylor and Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, 402.

³² Raymond C. Jr Ortlund, *God’s Unfaithful Wife: A Biblical Theology of Spiritual Adultery*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, v. Volume 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 27.



character of the God they confess. Fidelity is testimony; betrayal is counter-testimony. The character of God is implicated in every counseling session, whether the pastor names it or not.

Christ as Bridegroom: The New Testament Fulfillment

Ephesians 5:25–33 brings the biblical trajectory to its Christological climax.³³ Paul does not ground the husband’s obligation to love his wife in romantic feeling or mutual benefit; he grounds it in what Christ has done for the church. This love is self-giving, sanctifying, and unwavering even in the face of the bride’s faithlessness. As Stott observes, “If ‘headship’ means ‘power’ in any sense, then it is power to care not to crush, power to serve not to dominate, power to facilitate self-fulfillment, not to frustrate or destroy it.”³⁴ The Ephesians text on marriage goes beyond the horizontal ideas of how marriage should look; it is woven into Christ’s atoning work on the cross as the motivation and example in marriage.³⁵

The Christian husband’s faithfulness is therefore not anchored in the condition of the marriage but in the prior covenant love of Christ, a love he did not generate and cannot sustain by willpower alone. The same is true for the wife. Covenant faithfulness in Christian marriage is derivative; it flows from, and points back toward, the bridegroom who has not abandoned his bride. Köstenberger extends this further, situating marriage within the whole sweep of God’s redemptive design: “Marriage is thus shown to be part and parcel of God’s overarching salvation-historical purpose of ‘bringing all things together under one head, even Christ’ (Eph 1:10).”³⁶

Grounds for Divorce: Holding the Tension

A responsible pastoral theology of Malachi 2 cannot sidestep the question of legitimate grounds for divorce. Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 specifies sexual immorality as a reason for divorce, though not a must to divorce; 1 Corinthians 7:10–16 addresses the situation of a believer married to an unbeliever who abandons the marriage and therefore the believer is free to remarry, Heth notes, “The Genesis 2:24 ‘one flesh’ relationship that results from the marriage covenant ratified by vows before witnesses is not an indissoluble union. Rather, it should preeminently not be violated, and a sexual sin like adultery... is viewed as a major violation of the faithfulness vow.”³⁷ While these scriptures help provide a possible door, one should conduct a proper study and apply them to the

³³ G. K. Beale, ed., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 4. print (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 798–800.

³⁴ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 1st ed, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 234.

³⁵ Peter Chidolue Onwuka, ‘The Mystery of Marriage in Ephesians 5:21–33 and Implications for African Christians,’ *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 2, no. 1 (July 2022): 51–71, <https://www.shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/view/77>.

³⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*, 2nd ed (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010), 74.

³⁷ William A. Heth, ‘Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,’ in *Remarriage after Divorce in Today’s Church: Three Views*, ed. Mark L. Strauss (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 65



issues at hand.³⁸ These provisions do not contradict the covenant framework. They represent the pastoral provision of a God who knows that not every covenant can be held together when one party is committed to breaking it, “Malachi portrays God as the witness to these vows (Mal 2:14), as one who urges them to be faithful to their vows (v. 15), and even as one who is angry when the vows are broken (v. 16).”³⁹

The pastoral task is to hold both realities without collapsing either one. Divorce is not the unforgivable sin, and pastors who treat it as such do significant damage to people who have already suffered enough. Nor is it a neutral exit from an arrangement that has ceased to be convenient. Malachi’s language of violence and divine hatred is there to ensure that its gravity is never understated.

The Contemporary African Ecclesial Context

Economic Pressures and Transactional Marriage

In many East and Southern African Communities’ marriage does not take place between two individuals in isolation from a wider economic network. Bridewealth, *lobola* in southern African contexts, *ruracio* among the Kikuyu, and its different forms in different cultures, functions simultaneously as an expression of honor toward the bride’s family and, in its distorted forms, as a financial transaction that treats the woman as a commodity with a set price.⁴⁰ When the economic calculus changes, when a man’s financial circumstances improve, and he finds himself attracted to a wealthier or younger woman, the transactional logic of the original arrangement can make abandonment seem almost natural.

In the post-exilic community, Malachi’s contemporaries were doing the same thing: trading Israelite wives for foreign women with better economic prospects.⁴¹ What Malachi calls the community to see is that no economic justification, however plausible, removes the covenantal character of what is happening. The pastor working in contexts where marriage is deeply embedded in economic exchange cannot simply preach against infidelity in the abstract. He must engage the underlying theology of personhood and covenant that the transactional model contradicts.

³⁸ Philip Kimiti, ‘Marriage, Divorce, And Remarriage: An Exegetical Examination of The Themes with a Focus On 1 Corinthians 7:10–16’, *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 2021): 15–30, <https://shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/view/26>.

³⁹ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 155.

⁴⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd rev. and enl. ed (Gaborone: Heinemann Education Botswana, 1990), 137.

⁴¹ Hill, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, 322.



Extended Family Interference

African communal life carries real theological resonances. Malachi’s appeal to a shared covenant identity, “have we not all one Father?” finds a natural echo in cultures that locate personal identity firmly within the community rather than in the autonomous individual. However, the same communal structures that carry these gifts can also become sources of severe marital strain. When extended family authority routinely overrides the covenant obligations a couple has made to each other, when a father/mother-in-law’s expectations carry more weight than a husband’s vows, or when clan gatherings consume the financial resources, a household needs to survive, the community is functioning as a competitor to the covenant rather than its guardian. The pastor’s task is not to pit the individual against the community but to reorient the community’s role: its proper function is to witness to and uphold the couple’s covenant, not to dissolve it under accumulated pressure. This transactional distortion of marriage, reducing the covenant to an arrangement that can be exited when it no longer delivers returns, is the broader cultural pattern Malachi confronts, and one that the African pastor must name directly.

The Cultural Toleration of Male Infidelity

The cultural normalization of male extramarital relationships is, frankly, the most acute contextual challenge for any pastor seeking to apply Malachi 2 in many parts of Africa. Where male infidelity is accepted, or even quietly celebrated as a mark of status and courage, and polygamy is seen as the norm,⁴² the prophetic word of this passage lands with particular force precisely because Malachi addressed it to men. These are not instructions to victimized wives about how to endure; they are prosecutorial charges laid at the feet of the men who were doing the abandoning and divorcing.

Malachi’s command to “guard your spirit and do not be faithless” (v. 16c) reaches into the interior life of the man who has convinced himself that his behavior is justifiable, or unavoidable, or simply normal. The pastoral response to this in the counseling room cannot afford to be gentle to the point of complicity. The social and economic vulnerability of divorced women in many African contexts, loss of income, of status, of housing, of access to their own children, is precisely the same kind of violence that Malachi names as such.

A Counseling Framework Based on Malachi 2:10–16

Naming the Vertical Dimension

The first and most important move in counseling a marriage affected by infidelity is to name what has actually happened. Not only the relational wound, real and deep as that is, but the vertical

⁴² David Simotua Sigilai, ‘The Practice of Polygamy and Church’s Response: A Case Study Study of Africa Inland Church Losirwa in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya’, *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies* 1, no. 2 (November 2021): 73–86, <https://shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/view/59>.



failure, “There is no solution to our problem and no process of change other than the one God has provided.”⁴³ The unfaithful spouse has not merely wronged their partner; they have broken a covenant sworn before the God who was its witness. Framing it this way is not a strategy for piling on guilt; it is the only honest account of what has occurred, and therefore the only ground on which genuine repentance can take root. A person who understands infidelity as a purely relational problem will reach for relational solutions: better communication, rebuilt trust, a fresh start. Those are nothing. However, they do not reach the wound’s source. The wound runs deeper than the marriage because the treachery does. Where horizontal reconciliation is possible, it will be incomplete until vertical reckoning has begun. The counseling room, from the very first session, needs to be oriented toward that prior question. It is in the examination of this root cause that the heart of man is exposed, and any solution must target the heart.⁴⁴

God as Witness: Community and Accountability

The declaration that Yahweh is a covenant witness has structural implications for how counseling is conducted. In the African ecclesial context, accountability structures already exist in extended family and clan networks. The problem is that these often function as competitors to the covenant rather than its supporters. The church should be the community that serves as a covenant witness, holding the couple accountable not to cultural expectations but to the vows they made before God. The community of God’s people functions well in pointing out those drifting into sin and helping them get back. Tripp draws on Hebrews 3:13 to argue that community accountability is not optional in personal ministry: “we need the daily ministry of fellow believers.”⁴⁵

Practically, this means that counseling for marital infidelity should not be purely a private matter between a pastor and a couple. Where the couple agrees, trusted elders should be involved, not to expose or shame, but to embody the community’s role as covenant witness. This is not an intrusion into the marriage; it is the proper exercise of the communal accountability that Malachi assumes.

Guarding the Spirit: The Interior Life

Malachi’s command to “guard your spirit” (v. 16c) turns the counseling process inward. The passage is after more than modified conduct; it is pressing toward a transformed interior. An unfaithful man has not only made a series of wrong choices, but he has, over time, allowed desires, rationalizations, and habits of self-deception to settle into the interior life and harden there.

⁴³ Heath Lambert, *A Theology of Biblical Counseling: The Doctrinal Foundations of Counseling Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), 19.

⁴⁴ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, Resources for Changing Lives Ser (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2002), 60.

⁴⁵ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, 56.



Counseling that addresses only the acts and their visible consequences will circle the surface of the problem without ever reaching what drove it. Adams diagnosed the central failure of secular counseling as its refusal to name sin as the root of human problems. His conclusion was blunt: “The ultimate cause is sin.”⁴⁶ That diagnosis applies directly to the man in the counseling room who has constructed an elaborate architecture of self-justification for his infidelity.

In contexts where male entitlement and the cultural normalization of infidelity have shaped a man’s sense of himself over many years, this interior work is slow and demanding. It requires pastoral counselors who are equipped not only to apply biblical truth but to trace its application into the specific patterns of desire and self-justification that a particular man carries. This is precisely what Malachi’s double movement, the external indictment followed by the internal command, is doing. Without an inward target for a person, any attempt to change will be short-lived. Tripp captures it well, “Christ transforms people by radically changing their hearts. If the heart doesn’t change, the person’s words and behavior may change temporarily under external pressure or incentive. But when the pressure or incentive is removed, the changes will disappear.”⁴⁷

Godly Offspring: The Children’s Stake

The godly offspring in verse 15 should be brought explicitly into the counseling conversation.⁴⁸ Not as a threat or a manipulation, but as a pastoral reality: the children have a stake in what the parents decide, and the covenant logic of Malachi 2:15 requires that stake to be named. In many African contexts, children of households affected by infidelity bear the consequences: economic vulnerability, interrupted education, and the relational patterns and wounds they carry into their own adult lives.

Helping a couple to see their present choices through the lens of what they are modeling to their children is not a distraction from the immediate wound. It is the natural pastoral extension of what Malachi himself is doing in v. 15: naming the purpose for which God established marriage as covenant in the first place for the raising of a generation that will know and fear him, image-bearers formed in a home where fidelity is lived, not only taught.

A Redemptive Pathway: Reconciliation, Separation, and Grace for the Divorced

Not every marriage damaged by infidelity can or should be restored. Honest pastoral care requires naming that at the outset, rather than allowing a framework built around covenant to function as

⁴⁶ Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling*, The Jay Adams Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Ministry Resources Library, 1986), 32.

⁴⁷ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, 62.

⁴⁸ R. Kent Hughes, and Barbara Hughes. *Disciplines of a Godly Family*, Rev. ed (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2004), 21–35; Voddie Baucham Jr., *Family Driven Faith (Paperback Edition with Study Questions): Doing What It Takes to Raise Sons and Daughters Who Walk with God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 44–62.



quiet pressure to keep couples together regardless of what is actually happening. Where there is genuine repentance, willingness to rebuild trust, and the safety of both parties, reconciliation is the goal. Where violence is present, where repentance is absent, or where the safety of the wronged spouse or children is at stake, separation may be the necessary, even though deeply painful outcome. And where divorce has occurred, faithful pastoral care for the individuals involved remains the charge. Divorced men and women in the African church frequently occupy a painful marginal space, neither fully welcomed nor clearly accompanied. Malachi's framework is clear that divorce is a wound, and equally clear that the God who hates divorce is the same God who receives the wounded. The particular vulnerability of divorced women in many African contexts, economic, social, legal, and familial, demands that the church's pastoral care move beyond words. To take Malachi 2 seriously is not only to preach against infidelity; it is to build the kind of community that actively accompanies and supports those who have been left behind.

What holds across all outcomes is the Christological ground on which this counseling is conducted. The wronged spouse who cannot imagine trusting again is not primarily in need of a technique for rebuilding confidence; they need to be anchored in the faithfulness of the one whose fidelity does not depend on ours. The one carrying shame after their own failure needs to be brought to the bridegroom who has not sent his bride away. And where divorce has become the painful reality, pastoral care does not end there because the covenant love of God is not contingent on the intact marriage of the person who stands before him.⁴⁹

Conclusion

This article examined Malachi 2:10–16 as a theological and pastoral resource for addressing marital infidelity in the African church. The exegesis showed that marriage in this passage is designated as a covenant (*bērît*) transacted before Yahweh as divine witness, and that every act of marital faithlessness is therefore also an act of vertical treachery against God. The fourfold repetition of *bāgad* across vv. 10–16 weaves the marital and spiritual dimensions of betrayal into a single moral indictment, refusing to separate the horizontal from the vertical. The lexical distinction between *kērîtût* (the formal divorce certificate found in Deut 24:1) and *shalach* (the verb Malachi actually uses in v. 16) was shown to broaden the prophet's concern beyond legal divorce to include any act of marital abandonment, leaving wives exposed without even the minimal legal protection the Mosaic provision would have afforded them. Yahweh stands throughout as the covenant's third party, guarantor, and judge.

⁴⁹ Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 38.



The theological synthesis placed this dual-covenantal logic within the wider canonical witness. Across the prophetic corpus, from Hosea’s sign-act marriage to Gomer, through Ezekiel 16 and Jeremiah 3, Yahweh is consistently portrayed as Israel’s husband, which means that Israel’s marital betrayals carry theological weight as statements about the God they claim to serve. Ephesians 5:25–33 brings this trajectory to its Christological completion: Paul grounds marital fidelity not in feeling or social expectation but in the prior covenant love of Christ for the church, making the faithful spouse a participant in, and witness to, something larger than their own marriage. The African contextual analysis then identified the specific pressures against which this material must be heard: the embedding of marriage in economic exchange, the tendency of extended family structures to function as competitors rather than guardians of the covenant, and the cultural accommodation of male infidelity that blunts the prophetic force of a passage addressed directly to men. In response to these pressures, the counselling framework proposed five commitments: naming the vertical dimension before attempting horizontal repair; engaging the church community in its proper role as covenant witness; attending to the interior life as the site of genuine change; bringing the interests of children into the counselling conversation; and holding open a redemptive pathway that can honestly accommodate reconciliation, separation, or the faithful accompaniment of divorced persons.

The gendered dynamics of African marriage theology deserve fuller treatment than a single article permits. The specific pastoral challenges posed by polygamous contexts, where the question of covenant faithfulness becomes structurally complex, require their own sustained engagement. And the integration of trauma-informed care with the covenantal framework offered here is an area where pastoral theology and clinical insight still have much to say to each other. What this article has sought to establish is the theological claim from which all of that further work proceeds: marital infidelity is, at its root, infidelity to God.

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