

Amram married his aunt, and the daughters of Zelophehad married their first cousins, but later God revealed to Moses degrees of consanguinity within which the Israelites were not to marry. By the time of Jesus polygamy no longer existed, and forbidden degrees of consanguinity were firmly established.

b. Summary of the scriptural teaching concerning divorce

If divorce is a legal dissolution of the marriage bond, then we must ask if there are any proper grounds for such a dissolution. Jesus mentions immorality (Matthew 19:9); Paul mentions the death of one of the spouses (Romans 7:13); and Paul also mentions desertion by an unbelieving spouse (I Corinthians 7:15) as grounds for dissolution of the marriage bond. Death automatically dissolves the marriage bond; immorality or desertion provide proper grounds for divorce, but do not automatically dissolve the bond. Immorality and definitive desertion provide sufficient grounds for divorce, but not necessary grounds. Divorce is optional, not obligatory, for the innocent spouse. If it be objected that there are no innocent parties, a twofold response is available: (a) all fallen human beings, including believers, are imperfect and sinful; and (b) the innocent party is the one who does not commit adultery or desert his or her spouse; the guilty party is the one who does. There may be some contributory responsibility in the picture that will color innocence or mitigate guilt, but the principal issues are clear cut.

Throughout the Old Testament period divorce was tolerated but not approved. At the time of Christ's earthly ministry the rabbis were sharply divided as to whether divorce was permissible only for certain causes or for any cause. Jesus reminded His hearers that God's plan for marriage from the very beginning was to join one man to one woman for life, and that no human being should attempt to tear apart what God had joined together! Our Lord makes it clear that the writ of divorce mentioned in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Isaiah 50:1, and the act of divorce mentioned in Jeremiah 3:1-8 and Malachi 2:11-16, are not approved by God but permitted and tolerated by Him because of the hardness of men's hearts.

Some of Christ's statements in Matthew 5 and 19, Mark 10, and Luke 16 seem to require explanation. It may help to keep three concepts in mind as we attempt to understand these texts:

- (1) The concept of adultery -- which means having sexual relations outside the marriage bond
- (2) The concept of improper grounds for divorce -- which do not dissolve the marriage bond
- (3) The concept of the appearance of adultery -- whether or not one has actually committed it

In Matthew 5:31-32 a man who divorces his wife on improper grounds makes her appear as though she had committed adultery; and a man who marries a woman who has been divorced on improper grounds commits adultery with her, since she is still married to her husband.