

# PAGAN DIVORCE & RE-MARRIAGE

by Kyle Pope

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19:9 that fornication is the sole cause for an innocent spouse to divorce the guilty and remarry, was not produced in a moral vacuum, but in a real world of people facing the same challenges that exist today. Many of the loose values of today are merely echoes of ancient times.

## **Customs of the Pagans**

In the Greek world divorce was allowed for many reasons. In Athens while a woman seeking a divorce had to go before the Archon, a man could simply send a wife from his house. (Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 8). Among the Spartans it was believed a barren woman should be put away. (Herodotus, *Histories*, 5.39).

According to tradition Romulus the legendary founder of **Rome established marriage laws which allowed a man to put away his wife only for poisoning the children, counterfeiting the keys to the house, and adultery.** (Plutarch, *Romulus*, 22). By the first century such laws were disregarded. Caesar Augustus pushed through legislation intended to strengthen marriage and limit divorce, yet mostly it concerned financial penalties for unjustly divorcing a wife.

(Suetonius, *Augustus*, 34). Sadly, the dowry women brought into marriage was the only thing that preserved many ancient unions.

Not all ancients were so tolerant of divorce. Tacitus claimed the Germans maintained very strict marriage codes. Adultery was severely punished and a woman was said to take “one husband, just as she has one body for life.” (*Germania*, 18, 19).

## **Personal Behavior**

To the rulers of the lands in which the gospel was first preached the Lord's teachings on marriage and divorce were often in direct opposition to their own lifestyles. The governor Felix, to whom Paul spoke of “righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25) persuaded Drusilla to forsake her lawful husband the king of Emesa and unlawfully marry him. (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*). Cicero, governor of Cilicia, the province of Paul's birth, a century earlier had divorced Terentia, his wife of thirty years for squandering his assets, then married a young wealthy woman to pay his debts (Plutarch, *Cicero*, 41).

All the emperors mentioned in Scripture lived in violation of Christ's teaching. Augustus (Luke 2:1) divorced his first wife Claudia before the marriage was consummated. His second wife, Scribonia, previously married to two former consuls, he divorced claiming **"I could not bear the way she nagged at me."** His true love Livia, he stole away from her husband, although she was pregnant at the time. (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 62).

Livia's child, Tiberius, the second emperor (Luke 3:1), divorced his first wife Vipsania when she was pregnant again so shortly after birth of their son. Tiberius next married Julia, daughter of Augustus, whom eventually he divorced for sexual immorality. Although he had passed laws banishing noble women who had enrolled as prostitutes, he maintained a palace on the island of Capri where he indulged his own immoral desires. (Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 7; 35; 43).

Claudius, the third emperor mentioned in Scripture (Acts 11:28) divorced his first wife for both "scandalous behavior" and suspicion of murder. His second wife he divorced for less serious reasons. His third wife actually signed a formal marriage contract with another man while maintaining a marriage with him.

In the second century our Lord's teaching found no nobler audience. The religious writer Justin in a letter to the emperor Hadrian defending the Lord's teachings claimed: "Those who make second marriages according to human law are sinners in the sight of our Teacher" (*First Apology*, 15). He wrote this to an emperor widely known for his adulterous and homosexual relationship with a young man named Antinous (Spartianus, *Hadrian*, 12, 14).

## **The Remains of Shattered Lives**

Some suggest that "things are just different today!" A papyrus divorce certificate dating to 13 B.C. reveals little has changed. Although the document contains nothing about the pain and betrayal that led the two people to separate, it does reveal hearts as cold and materialistic as those in modern divorce courts. It declares, "Zois acknowledges that she has received from Antipater by hand from his house the material which he received for dowry, clothes in the value of 120 drachmae and a pair of gold earrings." Sadly, an ageless epitaph of a failed marriage.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Pope, K. (1998). [Divorce and Remarriage in Pagan Times](#). (S. Hall, Ed.) *Christianity Magazine*, 15(7), 16.