# Review: Not Under Bondage

Barbara Roberts' book is subtitled "Biblical Divorce for Abuse, Adultery & Desertion." It is a thorough consideration of how issues surrounding divorce and remarriage are handled by Scripture. While there is a definite pastoral aspect to this book (Roberts herself has been through an abusive marriage) it's main approach is *exegetical*. After setting the scene, and summarising her conclusions and where she is coming from, Roberts makes a decent consideration of relevant Pauline (1 Corinthians 7 in particular) and Old Testament passages as well as unpacking the teaching of Jesus.

The questions are clear: What are the Biblical grounds for divorce? And, if divorce is allowed, is remarriage also allowed? She helpfully puts forward the key concepts at the beginning of the book:

> - *The Bible distinguishes between "treacherous divorce" and "disciplinary divorce".*
> - *Disciplinary divorce is permitted by the Bible. This applies in cases of abuse, adultery or desertion, where a seriously mistreated spouse divorces a seriously offending spouse.*
> - *Treacherous divorce is condemned by the Bible. It occurs when a spouse obtains divorce for reasons other than abuse, adultery or desertion.*
> - *If the offending partner was sexually immoral, the Bible allows the non-offending partner to remarry.*
> - *If the offending partner was abused, deserted or unjustly dismissed the other, and the offender has been judged to be "as an unbeliever", the Bible allows the mistreated partner to remarry.*

By taking an exegetical approach Roberts is providing a service to victims of abuse who tend, often as a consequence of their abuse, to be "better at understanding the *letter* of God's Word than they are at interpreting general principles from scripture." (Page 37, emphasis mine). Here there is assistance to those who are vulnerable to being on the receiving end of scripture misapplied cruelly and abusively.

Coming to this book from a pastoral point of view I was encouraged by some of her conclusions. For instance, in general, the principle that "it is impossible to tell a victim that she ought to leave or stay at any particular juncture – the decision when or whether to leave must be left to each victim… all we can do is lay out the biblical principles that permit separation and help the victim to assess the discernible risk factors, leaving the ultimate choice to her." (Page 43) When people come for answers what they often really looking for is empowerment, freedom to choose the right thing.

The main food for thought for me was her consideration of 1 Corinthians 7. In particular, a key plank in her "abuse is grounds for divorce" argument rests on firstly, the equating of the abuser with being an "unbeliever" who has left (or has brought a separation to the marriage – see Page 48) , and secondly, the necessity for church discipline to determiner whether the abusing party is "acting as an unbeliever." The exegesis may need some strengthening in parts but I do not think this is an invalid application of a difficult text. It certainly aligns with her aim of allowing *all* of Scripture to speak – a harmonizing of Moses, Jesus and Paul (Page 108), if you like.

This part, and the rest of the book, certainly gels with my experience (and myriad mistakes) in engaging with people who are facing marital breakdown. I think evangelical considerations of marriage often take an overly-sacramental view that inappropriately elevates the covenantal bond to something eternal and unbreakable. My analogy is that in

marriage a new “unit” is formed (the couple in unity) – it is valuable, like a person. It should not be harmed, but can be harmed, it should not be killed, but can be killed. Roberts unpacks how the Bible affirms the value of marriage in the strongest possible way, without becoming separated from the reality that marriage covenants are broken.

Roberts’ insistence on church discipline should not be ignored. Yet, for me, it is the most difficult of her exhortations. Not because I disagree with her in the principle of it – but overwhelmed by the practice of it. So often it is incredibly difficult to find out what the truth is behind a marriage breakdown: who is the abuser, who is not? is the marriage sick, or just broken? is what the person saying a true expression of victimhood or manipulative lie? Roberts would do well to expand on *how* church leadership may go about exercising the judgement it needs to exercise.

For those trapped in abuse – particular those who are or have experienced religious justifications for that abuse – this book is invaluable. For those expected to give Biblically-grounded advice, this book is a must-read. I by-and-large agree with Roberts’ principles but they needs careful application wrapped in a cry to God for wisdom.