
The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

The language of Deut. 24:1ff has always been in dispute. The Heb. Words, "ervah debhar," on which a correct interpretation depends, are not easy of solution, though many exegetes, influenced possibly by some preconceived notion, pass over them quite flippantly. The phrase troubled the Jewish rabbis of olden times, as it does Jewish and Christian commentators and translators in our day. AV renders the two words, "some uncleanness," and in the margin, "matter of nakedness." The latter, though a literal tr of the Heb. Is quite unintelligible. RV and ASV both have "some seemly thing." Professor Driver translates the same words "some indecency." The Ger. RV (Kautzsch) has "atwas widerwartiges" ("something repulsive). We know of no modern version which makes "erwath debhar" the equivalent of fornication or adultery. And, indeed, in the very nature of the case, we are forced to make the words apply to a minor fault or crime, for, by the Mosaic law, the penalty for adultery was death (Dt. 22:20ff). It is, however, a question whether the extreme penalty was ever enforced. It is well known that at, and some time before, the time of our Saviour, there were two schools among the Jewish rabbis, that of Shammai, and that of Hillel. Shammai and his followers maintained that 'erwath debhar' signified nothing less than unchastity or adultery, and argued that only this crime justified a man in divorcing his wife. Hillel and his disciples went to the other extreme. They placed great stress upon the words, "if she find no favor in his eyes" immediately preceding 'erwath debhar' (Dt. 24:1), and contended that divorce should be granted for the flimsiest reason, such as spoiling of a dish either by burning or careless seasoning. Some of the rabbis boldly taught that a man had a perfect right to dismiss his wife, if he found another woman whom he liked better, or was more beautiful (Mish. Gittin, 14 10). Here are some other specifications taken from the same book: "The following may be divorced; She who violates the Law of Moses, e.g. causes her husband to eat food which has not been tithed....She who vows, but does not keep her vows...she who goes out on the street with her hair loose, or spins in the street, or converses (flirts) with any man, or is a noisy woman. What is a noisy woman? It is one who speaks in her own house so loud that the neighbors may hear her." It would be easy to extend the list, for the Mish and rabbinic writings are full of such laws.