

THE MEANING OF ADULTERY

OLAN HICKS

It is self-evident that a very significant factor in the study of divorce and remarriage is the defining of the word "adultery" as it occurs in most current English translations. The traditional view, that the "adultery" of the divorce passages takes place in the sexual activity of the subsequent marriage, is dependent on the word being defined as "unlawful sexual activity involving at least one married person." The non-traditional view, that the "adultery" occurs in the divorcing of one and marrying of another, apart from sexual action, depends on the word having possible definitions other than sexual action. If its meaning is purely sexual then the statement of Matthew 19:9 would have to be interpreted as a reference to the marital relationship in the second marriage for neither divorcing nor marrying is a sex act. On the other hand, if this word can be correctly defined as having a broader meaning which may include actions which are not sexual, then the text can be accepted more precisely as written, that a man who puts away his wife, without fornication as the cause, and marries another, commits adultery. It cannot be true that adultery can be committed by doing two non-sexual acts if adultery cannot be committed non-sexually. This is a very important question and therefore calls for a careful bit of word study.

In the Old Testament the word translated "adultery" is the Hebrew word *naaph*. In the New Testament the word in the Greek is *moicheia*. Scholars of the past 300 to 400 years definitely view these words with a sexual emphasis. Virtually all lexicons, dictionaries, and word studies give as the first definition, "to have unlawful intercourse with another's wife," or something similar to that.¹ However they are also pretty unanimous in listing other uses as second and third definitions, thereby recognizing that instances do occur in scripture where the word is used in reference to non-sexual activity. These they consider as "figurative" or symbolic. Thayer, for example, says *moicheuein* is used of those who at a woman's solicitation are drawn away to idolatry, i.e. to the eating of things sacrificed to idols," and cites Revelation 2:22 and Jeremiah 3:9 as examples of that usage.² Earlier on the same page he offers this explanation: "As the intimate alliance of God with the people of Israel was likened to a marriage, those who relapse into idolatry are said to commit adultery or play'the harlot."

When we check the definitions of other scholars we find most of them also follow this same course. The logical question is this: Does this explanation represent the etymology of this word? Is this opinion drawn from the root or stem connotation or is it an opinion arbitrarily imposed upon the word without real justification? We said that this opinion has prevailed among scholars of the past three or four centuries. What about scholars prior to that time? How did they define it? We also have the problem of Bible passages where the word is used to refer to something which is even outside these two categories of sex and idolatry. Jesus, for example, used it in reference to seeking after a sign (Matthew 12:39). James used it of friendship with the world (James 4:4). In the text of Matthew 19:9 it is apparently used of divorcing and remarrying. So already we have found five different applications of the word in scriptures: 1. Unlawful sexual activity by married persons, 2. Idolatry, 3. Seeking after a sign, 4. Friendship with the world, and 5. Divorce and remarriage. It seems to this student that this is too many applications with too many differences in content to be explained away as simply "figurative uses."

Concerning the etymology of both the Greek and Hebrew word, the fact is we have none. When we check the definitions of the scholars we do not find any etymology given as a basis for defining the word, as we do in the case of most other word definitions. Truman Scott, highly respected scholar in the western states, now with Sunset School of Preaching in Lubbock, Texas, recently engaged in detailed and lengthy research on these words, and came up with some rather shocking information. In a symposium type speech opposite Wayne Jackson, presented at Martinez, California, on September 25, 1982, Scott said, "As you study most of the word study books, the lexicons and so forth; even on the most insignificant

words, there is often page after page of historical study concerning the etymology and the root meaning of the word. And yet on such a word so crucial that it is wrapping up three fourths of our population, we cannot find the root meaning of the word, nor can we find its etymology."³ Scott expressed his view of the situation as being that the prevailing definition of modern times has been formulated more on the basis of what fits with the concepts of tradition than on any actual etymological or textual evidence. He cited how this happened with other words such as baptizo, *episcopos*, psallo, and perhaps others. He said, "Some of these scholars took the Greek word baptizo, gave it a modern meaning, and projected that back into the data of the New Testament. They took the word *episcopos* and projected the ecclesiastical, hierarchical structure of the bishop that was common in their day back into the New Testament."⁴ Then he added,

The same is true in the case of adultery. They have taken a modern word of the 16th century and projected it back into the New Testament data. As a result, as we read the scriptures we read with the meaning of that 16th century word and understand it in that light. It got us in trouble on baptism, it got us in trouble on church organization. I am suggesting that It may well be getting us in trouble in the question of adultery. Only one scholar of the dozens and dozens I conferred with admitted the obvious, we have lost the etymology of the word *moicheia*. We do not know what it means. We do not even know what its root meaning is.

Looking back into the history of translations we do indeed find a very interesting progression of thought relative to the divorce passages. The first major translation of the Greek text was into Latin, in 385 A.D. by Jerome. In this version the word *moicheia* was evidently just transliterated into *mochatur*. In two cases Jerome introduced into the text the word *adulterio*, which means to alter or to adulterate by adding something. This would make the passage say that the man who puts away his wife and marries another alters his marriage covenant or adulterates the marriage. This word did not, at that time, place any sexual emphasis. Jerome retained the emphasis upon what was being done to the marriage being broken, not what was going to be done in a subsequent marriage. In later centuries, however, the meaning of this word evolved, as did our English word "adultery," into a word with a sexual connotation.

In 1385 John Wycliff made the first English translation. He worked from the Latin Vulgate, Jerome's translation, probably consulting also the Greek text, but Latin was his major source. But Wycliff used a very old English word "avowteria" to translate the Greek word in question. Looking closely at this word we see that it is built on the word "vow" and has the "a" in front signifying a negative. It has to do therefore, with vows, and it has to do with vows being negated. This version also retains the idea that the man who sends away his wife and takes another does something against the vow, against the pledge, against the marriage covenant.

In 1535 William Tyndale made an English translation of the scriptures and he worked from the Greek text of Erasmus, who preceded him by only a few years. Tyndale's translation of Matthew 19:9 is typical of the way he translated all the divorce passages. It reads, "I say therefore unto you whosoever putteth away his wyfe (except it be for fornicacion) and marryeth another breaketh wedlocke. And whosoever marryeth her which is divorced doeth comyt advourty." His rendering of Mark 10:11 is that whoever puts away his wife and marries another "breaketh wedlocke to herward." He renders verse 12, "And if a woman forsake her husband and be maryed to another, she committeth advourtrie." Clearly Tyndale understood the Greek term *moichatai* as having reference to the betrayal of the marriage covenant, not to the illegitimacy of a sexual action that would come later.

Five years later the "Great Bible" of 1540 rendered the same identical translation of these verses as did Tyndale, using "breaketh wedlocke" and "doeth comyt advourty" to translate the Greek word *moichatai*. This version was produced when it became needful to revise the Matthew's Bible because of offensive notes it contained. Matthew's Bible had used Tyndale's revision of 1535 for its New Testament. To supply the need for Bibles in the English churches Miles Coverdale was chosen to oversee the project of producing a satisfactory Bible. In April of 1539, 111 years after the burning of the bones of Wycliff, this Bible, called "The Great Bible" because of its size, was issued with the approval of the

king of England, who had been assured that no heresies were maintained in it. It is significant that Coverdale and the scholars whom he supervised in this work left these passages intact exactly as Tyndale had translated them.

But in a very short time some changes were to come about which did not appear great then but now stand out as the very crossroads point at which the entire meaning of the divorce passages was altered in the text. At the accession of Edward VI the regulations restricting the circulation of the Bible were revoked and churches were again ordered to have Bibles. He only reigned six years (1547-1553) but in that short time 35 editions of the New Testament were printed and 13 editions of various complete Bibles. But then Mary became queen and a complete eclipse occurred. Public reading of scripture was prohibited on August 18, 1553, by proclamation. No Bibles were published in England during Mary's reign (1553-1558). Church Bibles were confiscated and persecution was waged heavily. Many reformers fled to the continent. Those who were exiled at Geneva prepared a translation and it was presented to the next queen (Elizabeth) in 1560. It was not until 1576, however, that the Geneva Bible was printed in England. This Bible was favored by the Puritans and enjoyed a remarkable popularity, as evidenced by the fact that it was issued in 180 editions. It became firmly established. Even Shakespeare, in his later plays, reflected a knowledge of the wording of the Geneva Bible. This version was significant in regard to our subject here because it went back to the Latin *adulterio* and apparently coined the English word "adulterie" as a translation of *moichatai* in all the divorce passages. This word, as understood then, did not immediately change the meaning of these verses. But later, when the word itself evolved, it took on a meaning which did seriously alter meanings in scripture.

Church officials found considerable fault, not with the translation of the Geneva Bible but with the notes it contained. Matthew Parker carried through a revision therefore. This came to be called the "Bishop's Bible" because most of the work was done by bishops. This Bible became pretty much the official church Bible of the Elizabethan age. A Convocation in 1571 ordered that copies be in the house of every bishop and in every cathedral. The Bishop's Bible put the English word "adultery" just as we spell it today in the divorce passages. This Bible was published first in 1568 with a revised edition in 1602, which also kept the same reading in these verses.

Early in the next century the King James version was authorized and translators went to work on it. But they were given several rules and restrictions by King James, one of which was that they were to follow the Bishop's Bible wherever possible. Naturally then, *moichatai* is translated with the word "adultery" in this version, following the Bishop's Bible. Even the title page phrase "Appointed to be read in Churches" was carried over from the Bishop's Bible. Despite early opposition against it the King James Bible eventually became established the world around and has been the dominant version *ever* since, especially in Protestant churches. The first English Bible printed in America, in 1782, was the King James version.

Thus the Latin word *adulterio* worked its way into Roman translations through Jerome in the divorce passages and the English word "adultery" came into English versions through a reliance by some translators upon Latin precedents. The idea fits so perfectly with the Catholic "sacrament" concept of marriage, which during the same time period came to be established around the world, that a majority of modern scholars have evidently accepted the whole package and have not thought to re-examine it from a more objective standpoint. It is natural, of course, that the etymology of the Greek word or the Hebrew word would not follow it through these transitions and so today it is not defined etymologically, as most words are, but arbitrarily, according to currently accepted usages

It is as Truman Scott suggested. When you read the lexicons now you find that these scholars start with a definition that was born in the 16th century. Some scholars back there took a word that was new in that time and with its own definition, and applied it arbitrarily in translation of these passages. It has no etymological connection with the Greek word in these verses. It was a new word introduced into the

English text and it eventually evolved and brought about a serious revision in the sense of the passages where it occurs. Primarily what has been lost in this revision is the basic idea of sinning against marriage by breaking it. The idea of betrayal of vows, or covenant obligations, has been replaced with the idea of a sinful sexual practice in the subsequent marriage relationship. Instead of "breaking wedlock" or committing "avowteria" against the wife put away, it is now said that the man commits the sin of sexual intercourse with the second wife because she is not really his wife in the eyes of God. There is no way one can approach Matthew 19:9 objectively, without the preconceptions of the traditional theory, and get that out of it. One cannot let the protasis be the protasis and let the apodosis be the apodosis, apply the individual words as they *are* used elsewhere in scripture, and have the verse come out saying that. It simply is not there. To recover the message that is there we must recover the meaning of *moichatai* as the scriptures use it, along with its kindred Hebrew word *naoph*. This is what we had to do with *baptizo*, with *episcopos*, and with other words whose meanings were altered at this same point in history. But the determined effort to return to scriptural usage was *very* fruitful. I believe it will be in this case also.

Some have already said that we are trying to change the meaning of "adultery," to give it "a new and novel meaning." This is completely incorrect. The meaning has already been changed. What we are trying to do is step back over that point in time where it was changed and return to the usage of scripture. When this same work of restoration was being done in reference to baptism the reformers were accused of trying to change its meaning. Theologians who have accepted so completely the definitions and resultant concepts of their heritage that they do not even question them, usually have resentments against those who do. But, as Truman Scott pointed out, "The scholars are not inspired. The lexicons, as awesome as they may be, the commentaries, the word studies, the dictionaries, as much scholarship as they represent, which in large part is very accurate, does not and should not intimidate us. . . . Let's go back and plow where they plowed." With brother Scott, we have great respect for the scholars, each of whom through a lifetime of devoted labor scaled the heights of linguistic and Biblical knowledge to bring so much light to bear upon the Bible. But they knew they were not infallible. In most cases they would themselves urge that their findings be put to every legitimate test, for that is precisely what they did to the findings of their own predecessors. If they were inaccurate on any point they would want it known for that was the principal objective of their own lifelong commitment.

A FEW SCHOLARS DID NOTICE IT

The usage of "adultery" in a non-sexual sense in the divorce passages has not gone entirely unnoticed by some very capable writers. Foy E. Wallace Jr. for example, the venerable editor of the Gospel Advocate in the early thirties, pointed out almost exactly what we have set forth here regarding this word and the difference between the way Jesus used it and the meaning currently attributed to it. In his book, *The Sermon On The Mount And The Civil State*, the following paragraph says it clearly:

Fourth: The word adultery in New Testament usage does not necessarily refer to the sinful physical act, it is not restricted to the one way of violating the bond. In the four passages in Matthew, Mark, and Luke the term adultery is given the sense of ignoring the bond, of which a man is guilty who formally puts away his wife unjustifiably and regards himself no longer connected with her by contract - he considers himself unhitched. The passages in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 16 discuss hypothetically the man who manifests this view by marrying again. His sin of adultery consisted in treating the original contract as null and void when it was not. The phrase "put away" in the verses means to formally divorce, not merely to "send away," or separate, and he thereby assumed the bond to be wholly dissolved. The guilt

consisted in the formal assertion of freedom which God declared "from the beginning" to be non-existent, a guilt that remained unaffected by any sequel other than the exception which the Lord specified. Accordingly, by adultery, Jesus meant the attempt to dissolve the indissoluble; but its current meaning is rather the act that dissolves it, and in this way the common usage falls short of the teaching of Christ.

R.C.H. Lenski, commenting on Luke 16:18, observed that the "marrying" occurs simultaneously with the "adultery," no doubt taking notice of the present participles in the verse. Of the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke he said, "All of them regarded marriage as being something that was to be dissolved at pleasure. The man who married a discarded wife married her only in this way, i.e. himself to discard her when he so pleased. In the very act of marrying her (gamon expresses action that *is* simultaneous with that of moicheuei) he thus violated God's law of marriage." On the next page he says, "By this very act of marrying this man, moicheuei, bricht *die Ehe*, exactly like the other and helps break down the divine institution of marriage." In his commentary on Mark 10:11 Lenski says concerning Jesus, "In his estimation the sin consisted in the disruption of the marriage, no matter by what means this was effected. In all his utterances Jesus treats only the immorality that is involved in the disruption of marriage, whether this immorality emanates from the husband or from the wife; and not the legal actions of any court of law." On the next page he says,

In all his utterances on this subject Jesus blames only the one who disrupts the marriage and not the one whose marriage is disrupted. The mistranslations of Matthew 5:32 should not confuse us on this point, nor the exegesis that operates with these mistranslations. I Corinthians 7:15 is exactly the same as Matthew 5:32, 19:9, and the passages in Mark. The innocent party in a disrupted marriage is "not bound" as Paul states, nor does Jesus declare that party bound. The deduction cannot be drawn from the words of Jesus that a disrupted marriage is still a binding marriage in the sight of God. In all the passages the condemnation rests on the disruption of the marriage, no matter what the cause may have been. . . . Nowhere does Jesus forbid the innocent party of a disrupted marriage to marry again. As regards the guilty one who causes the disruption, the way of repentance is surely open also for such a sinner as it is open for any other who has caused an irreparable wrong to another.