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Appendix 7c: Mark 10:11–12 and the False Equality in Adultery

This page is part of the series on the unions God accepts and follows this sequence:

1. Appendix 7a: Virgins, Widows, and Divorced Women: The Unions God Accepts
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The Meaning of Mark 10 in the Doctrine of Divorce

This article refutes mistaken interpretations of Mark 10:11-12, which suggest that Jesus taught equality between men and women in adultery or that women could initiate divorce in the Jewish context.

QUESTION: Is Mark 10:11-12 proof that Jesus changed God's law on divorce?

ANSWER: It is not proof — not even close. The most important point against the idea that in Mark 10:11-12 Jesus teaches that (1) a woman can also be a victim of adultery, and (2) that a woman can also divorce her husband, is the fact that such an understanding contradicts the general teaching of Scripture on this topic.

An essential principle in theological exegesis is that no doctrine should be built on the basis of a single verse. It is necessary to consider the entire biblical context, including

what other inspired books and authors say. This is a fundamental principle to preserve the doctrinal integrity of Scripture and prevent isolated or distorted interpretations.

In other words, these two mistaken understandings drawn from this phrase in Mark are far too serious for us to claim that here Jesus changed everything God had taught on the subject since the patriarchs.

If this were truly a new instruction from the Messiah, it should appear elsewhere — and with greater clarity — especially in the Sermon on the Mount, where the topic of divorce was addressed. We would have something like:
"You have heard that it was said to those of old: a man may leave his wife and marry another virgin or widow. But I say to you: if he leaves his wife to unite with another, he commits adultery against the first..."

But, obviously, this does not exist.

Exegesis of Mark 10:11-12

Mark 10 is **highly contextual**. The passage was written during a time when divorce took place with minimal rules and could be initiated by both sexes — something very different from the reality in the days of Moses or Samuel. Just consider the reason why John the Baptist was imprisoned. **This was the Palestine of Herod**, not that of the patriarchs.

At this time, the Jews were heavily influenced by the customs of Greco-Roman society, including in matters of marriage, physical appearance, female authority, etc.

The doctrine of divorce for any reason

The doctrine of divorce for any reason, taught by Rabbi Hillel, was the result of social pressure exerted on Jewish men, who, as is natural to fallen human beings, wanted to get rid of their wives to marry others who were more attractive, younger, or from wealthier families.

This mindset, unfortunately, is still alive today, **including within churches**, where men leave their wives to unite with others — **almost always also women who are already divorced**.

Three central linguistic points

The passage in Mark 10:11 contains three key words that help clarify the real meaning of the text:

και λεγει αυτοις Ος εαν απολυση την **γυναικα** αυτου και γαμηση αλλην μοιχαται **ἐπ'** **αὐτήν**

γυναίκα (gynaika)

γυναίκα is the accusative singular of γυνή, a term which, in marital contexts like Mark 10:11, specifically refers to a married woman — not a woman in a general sense. This shows that Jesus' answer is centered on the violation of the marriage covenant, not on **new legitimate bonds with widows or virgins**.

ἐπί (epí)

ἐπί is a preposition that normally means "upon," "with," "on top of," "inside." While some translations choose "against" in this verse, that is not the most common nuance of ἐπί — especially in light of the linguistic and theological context.

In the most widely used Bible in the world, the NIV *(New International Version)*, for example, out of the 832 occurrences of **ἐπί**, only 35 are translated as "against"; in the rest, the idea expressed is "upon," "on top of," "inside," "with."

αὐτήν (autēn)

αὐτήν is the feminine singular accusative form of the pronoun αὐτός. In the biblical Greek (Koine) grammar of Mark 10:11, the word "αὐτήν" (autēn - her) does not specify which woman Jesus is referring to.

The grammatical ambiguity arises because there are two possible antecedents:

- **τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ** (“his wife”) — the first woman
- **ἄλλην** (“another [woman]”) — the second woman

Both are in the **feminine**, **singular**, **accusative**, and appear within the **same sentence structure**, which makes the reference of “αὐτήν” grammatically ambiguous.

Contextualized translation

Considering what is read in the original, the translation most consistent with the historical, linguistic, and doctrinal context would be:

*“Whoever leaves his wife (**γυναίκα**) and marries another — that is, another **γυναίκα**, another woman who is already someone’s wife — commits adultery upon/inside/on top of/with (**ἐπί**) her.”*

The idea is clear: the man who leaves his legitimate wife and unites with another woman who was also already another man’s wife (therefore, not a virgin) **commits adultery with this new woman** — a soul already joined to another man.

The true meaning of the verb “apolýō”

As for the idea that Mark 10:12 provides biblical support for a legal divorce initiated by a woman — and that she could thus marry another man — this is an anachronistic interpretation with no support in the original biblical context.

First, because in that very verse Jesus concludes the sentence by saying that if she unites with another man, the two commit adultery — **exactly as He states in Matthew 5:32**. But linguistically, the mistake comes from the true meaning of the verb translated as “divorce” in most Bibles: ἀπολύω (apolýō).

The translation as “divorce” reflects modern customs, but in biblical times, ἀπολύω simply meant: **to release, to let go, to set free, to send away**, among other physical or

relational actions. In biblical usage, ἀπολύω does not carry a legal connotation — it is a verb expressing separation, without implying formal legal action.

In other words, Mark 10:12 simply states that if a woman leaves her husband and unites with another man **while the first is still alive**, she commits adultery — not because of legal issues, but because she breaks a covenant that is still in force.

Conclusion

The correct reading of Mark 10:11-12 preserves consistency with the rest of Scripture, which distinguishes between virgins and married women, and avoids introducing new doctrines based on a single poorly translated phrase.