

DIVORCE - THE "PASSIVE ADULTERY" THEORY

By Allon Maxwell

On a few occasions I have encountered an "interpretation" of Jesus' words about divorce and remarriage ([Matthew 5:31-33](#) & [Matthew 19:9](#)), which for the purpose of this paper, I shall refer to as the "**passive adultery**" theory.

In these verses, the Greek verb used to describe the act of adultery is in the passive voice.

It is claimed that these passive verbs have been incorrectly translated and that Jesus did not mean to say at all that anyone was actually guilty of adultery!

It is further claimed that nothing in the words of Jesus forbids a second marriage!

They say that the fault begins with the first husband who unjustly divorces his wife. He makes her **appear** to be an adulteress in the eyes of others, when they assume that adultery is the reason for the divorce, (even though she is innocent and whether she remarries or not)!

In the same way, if she does marry again, then both she and the man who marries her are not really adulterers, but merely **wrongly stigmatised** as so, by those who mistakenly assume that she was divorced for adultery.

This opinion has been advanced by R.C.H. Lenski (1943) and William Luck (1987), both of whom have written books (now out of print) which promote it. It does not seem to be widely held, but I have occasionally encountered it in other divorce literature.

As a laymen with almost no credible scholastic ability in Greek I am caught between the "experts".

On one hand there are those "experts", some of whom are good friends, who tell me that the verbs should be translated as passive, justifying their "passive adultery" theory.

On the other hand another good friend, with credibility in Greek at least equal to those others, assures me that it is quite proper to translate the passive Greek verbs used in these verses, as ACTIVE English verbs.

This is exactly what the scholars who translated ALL of our major English versions have done!

How shall we decide between the two? It is vitally important to resolve that question.

The answer will decide whether or not many remarried divorcees are living in adultery.

"PASSIVE ADULTERY" BY THE WOMAN

The "traditional" view of [Matthew 5:32](#) has been, of course:

A man who divorces his wife,
(thus wrongly declaring her "free" to remarry),
poiei auten moicheuthenai
causes her to commit adultery
(if she does actually marry again).

The words in parenthesis are taken as inferred.

However, this is not an unreasonable inference in the light of the words immediately following, which refer to the man who marries her.

The "creative" alternative rendering of this is:

Poiei auten (.....) **moicheuthenai**
causes her (to be stigmatised as) an adulteress
(Even though she is innocent, and whether she marries or not).

Even if the "experts" who insist on a "passive" translation have a point, it certainly does not follow that the addition of "stigmatised" is valid.

If in fact it is valid to translate the verb as passive, what would it REALLY mean?

Let us make a few definitions, before we discuss the Greek word itself.

As I understand it an active verb means "a person does something".

The passive means "something is done to a person".

Adultery is "the defiling of a one flesh relationship between two parties, by the intrusion of a third party".

Active adultery means "she commits adultery".

Passive adultery means "she is defiled (by her own ACTION and by the man who commits adultery with her)".

If we must use the passive voice at all, the correct meaning would be something like:

Poiei auten moicheuthenai (Greek passive)

Causes her to be defiled (English passive)
(by marriage to the man mentioned in the same verse, and, of course, if she actually does remarry).

I suggest that this use of the passive verb is far more credible than any totally untenable and unwarranted **creation** of the word "stigmatised".

The Greek context does not give the slightest hint of "stigmatised".

On the other hand, "if she actually does remarry" seems to be fully implied in what Jesus is saying about both the man and the woman.

A free "passive paraphrase" of [Matthew 5:32](#), would be something like:

"When a woman remarries, after being divorced by her husband, for any cause at all except unchastity, (RSV), she is defiled by her own action and also by the action of the man who marries her. Both commit adultery. However, the guilt also extends to the first husband, who divorced his wife unjustly. He will be held responsible for causing his wife's defilement."

This view takes account of the passive verb form and also fits with what JESUS says about divorce, remarriage and adultery elsewhere, in the other Gospels.

"PASSIVE ADULTERY" BY THE MAN

In [Matthew 5:32](#), the traditional interpretation is, (from the RSV Interlinear Greek Text):

os ean apolelumen gamese moichatai

Whoever a dismissed marries commits
(woman) adultery

The "passive adultery" theory says that the Greek verb used here should be translated to declare the second husband INNOCENT of adultery!

Their "creative" passive rendition is :- "*Whoever a dismissed (woman) marries is stigmatised as an adulterer*", (ADDING words in English which are clearly NOT in the Greek text and not in any way implied there).

It is true that the Greek verb form used here of the man, is passive. If it is correct to translate it as passive, it would certainly imply that something is done to the man.

However, exactly the same verb form is used in [Matthew 19:9](#) and [Mark 10:11-12](#), where it is fairly clear that someone is **actively** committing adultery, if they divorce and remarry.

The use of the passive voice in all three places, simply means that any who divorce and remarry, or who marry a divorced person, are being defiled (passive!) by what THEY ARE DOING. (active!)

CONCLUSION

We must now choose between the "experts"!

This "passive adultery" theory depends on what I call "creative" Greek the art of "*making what is seen out of things which do not appear*". i.e. making something out of nothing! ([Hebrews 11:3](#))

In this case the "something out of nothing" is the word "stigmatised".

We must reject the "passive adultery" theory as a speculative and unwarranted distortion of the teaching of Jesus.

Instead we must choose those "experts" who tell us that the translation into English as an active verb is quite valid!

It is much more credible to retain the rendition given to us by the many scholars and translators responsible for ALL of the major English versions.

That brings us back to the main point of the teaching of Jesus.

Except for that one cause of unchastity, there is no possible ground for men to separate what God has joined.

If divorce results from any other cause, there is no licence from Jesus for remarriage, (and there are no "innocent party" exceptions).

Anyone divorced for any of those other causes, who marries again while the first partner is still living, commits adultery.