ADULTERY – WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

by Gary Martin

LET'S BEGIN OUR STUDY by assuming total ignorance. We do not know what "adultery" means, but we intend to find out. Our first step might be to look up the word in an English dictionary. But (1) English dictionaries do not always define words the way the Bible uses them, and (2) "adultery" is an English translation of Hebrew and Greek words used in the original biblical texts.

Thus, we determine that we will consult the very best original language concordances available (Even-Shoshan for Hebrew O.T.; Hatch/Redpath for LXX; K. Aland for N.T.) in order to assemble the texts. Etymologies are only of very limited value, so we will not spend much time here (see Baar, *Semantics* & Silva, *Biblical Words*). An examination of the contexts brings us to Leviticus 20:10. First, it is important to note that both Leviticus chapters 18 & 20 deal with sexual sins: Leviticus 18 gives prohibitions, Leviticus 20 adds punishments. Comparing Leviticus 20:10 with 18:20 is most instructive. The literal translations of the Hebrew Texts are given below:

Leviticus 18:20

And unto the wife of your fellow you shall not *give your copulation for seed*, to be defiled with her.

Leviticus 20:10

And a man who *shall commit adultery* with a wife of a man, who *shall commit adultery* with the wife of his neighbor, he shall surely be put to death, both the *adulterer* and the *adulteress*.

These verses tell us that the Hebrews understood "adultery" as "sexual intercourse" in the specific sense of that between a man and the wife of another man. This is the oldest documented meaning of the term in the Bible. Other Old Testament passages substantiate this basic idea (see also Job 24:15; compare Proverbs 6:32 with 6:29).

A transition from adultery as a specific kind of unlawful sexual intercourse to a figurative use for the spiritual unfaithfulness of God's people toward God occurs for the first time (historically) in Hosea. (Note: the term "Fornication" already had a spiritual connotation back in the days of Moses [Exodus 34:15–16; Leviticus 20:5–6, etc.], but the Hebrew for "adultery," for some reason, was not used of religious idolatry until Hosea.) Yet, even in spiritual adultery, literal adultery often took place. Note Hosea 4:11–19 where idolatry is connected with "temple prostitutes" and "brides" who "commit adultery" (verse 14). Jeremiah 3:9 speaks of adultery with "stones and trees," but one should not overlook that what occurred "on every high hill & under every green tree" was not a mere bowing down to idols of wood and stone, but along with this were cultic sexual orgies.

Thus, the use of "adultery" for Israel's unfaithfulness to God is meaningful for at least two significant reasons: (1) because of the connection between idolatry and literal adultery; and (2) in order to intensify the concept of Israel's sin—it wasn't just spiritual fornication—it was spiritual adultery, a violation of the spiritual "marriage" covenant between God and Israel.

The New Testament also uses "adultery" in both literal and figurative senses. Matthew 5:28 then broadens the application to "the heart." It is found in numerous "sin lists" of the New Testament as clearly prohibited by God. Hebrews 13:4 contrasts the "marriage bed" with "adulterers." The Greek word for "marriage bed" can refer to sexual intercourse (the word "coitus" from it). In John 8:4–5, a woman was "caught in adultery, in the very act." By New Testament times "adultery" lost its "one-sidedness," it was similarly applied to intercourse between a woman and the husband of another woman.

"Adultery" and words related to it are also used in non-biblical Greek texts. The parallel between Aristotle's *History of Animals* & his *Generation of Animals* equates "adultery" with "intercourse" (in an illegitimate sense). In Philo's *The Decalogue* (131), "adultery" is described literally as "unlawful sexual intercourse."

As far as grammatical considerations are concerned, the "passive" forms of Greek verbs based on *"moich-"* are frequently used in Classical Greek, LXX, and the "church fathers" in an active sense, which refutes Lenski's position that the passive form must somehow find passive expression in translation.

A detailed study of the relationship between words for "fornication" and "adultery" will indicate that both terms have inherent sexual meanings, along with the figurative or spiritual uses. In Matthew 19:9, the word "marry" should also be carefully studied. In Israelite culture, to "marry" was to celebrate a "marriage feast" (not the mere signing of legal documents, which was connected more with the "betrothal"). The focal point of a "marriage feast" (usually lasting seven days) was the coming together of husband and wife in sexual union for the first time.

Thus, using the biblical contexts as our guide, and then backing up the biblical evidence with non-biblical texts, "adultery," when applied to a man and a woman, refers to an unlawful sexual relationship, specifically between a married person and one of the opposite sex not that person's spouse. In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus extends this definition to include the sexual relationship with one not "rightfully" a spouse in accord with God's plan and original design for marriage.[1]

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[1] Martin, G. (1989). "Adultery"—What Does It Mean? (P. Earnhart, Ed.)*Christianity Magazine*, *6*(8), 20.