

## “AGAINST HER” OR “WITH HER” IN MARK 10.11?

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Mark 10.11 records Jesus as saying, in the NIV translation, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her.” In this translation, Jesus is making the point at the end of this verse that the adultery of which he speaks is “against” this man’s erstwhile and now discarded wife, who is clearly the “her” referred to.

The Greek phrase being rendered “against her” is ἐπ’ αὐτήν, and ἐπί is here being given an adversive sense, the adultery referred to being viewed as an act *against* the former wife. This is the almost universal way in which the phrase is translated. Almost universal, but not quite: I note for example that Beck (1964, 82), Adams (1977, 124), and Mann (1986, 385) all translate the phrase instead as “with her.” So also Green in his *Interlinear Greek/English New Testament* (1980, 107) and the translators’ diglot of Mark (BFBS 1961) both give the equivalent of this phrase as “with her.” That is to say, these translations, to the contrary, take the αὐτήν “her” to be the *second* woman, the person with whom the man is said to be now committing adultery.

What do commentators say concerning this phrase and its meaning? For the most part they ignore it as not being a point worth mentioning, accepting without discussion the rendering “against her.” Those few who acknowledge an ambiguity in the phrase dismiss it swiftly before passing on. Thus Grant says, “**Against her** is superfluous and ambiguous: Which woman is meant? Presumably the former, who is still his wife; but the parallels lack it” (1951, 797).

Hiebert says,

Among the Jews, the prevailing reason for divorce was the very purpose of marrying another. . . . [T]o divorce the wife was a sin, but not adultery; the guilt of adultery came with marrying another. *Against her* has been understood in two ways; it either refers to the first or second wife. Under the latter view, the man is guilty of bringing adultery upon the woman with whom he now lives. More probably, the reference is to the first wife; he thus makes himself guilty of committing adultery against her. (1974, 241)

And France says, “The words ἐπ’ αὐτήν might conceivably be understood with reference to the new wife (‘with her,’ literally ‘upon her’), but are more naturally taken of the original wife (‘against her’)” (2002, 393-94). Thus, France also briefly considers the two alternatives, and firmly chooses “against her.”

None of these commentators gives any basis for his view except to say that the words are “presumably” (Grant) or “more probably” (Hiebert) or “more naturally” (France) to be taken thus. But this is simply an opinion, not an argument, or a reason.

Yet is it really so clear and so certain that the αὐτήν refers to the original wife rather than the second woman? For there is a case to be made for the rendering “with her,” with the reference being to the latter woman.

### 1. The use of ἐπί

First of all, consider the phrase ἐπ’ αὐτήν itself. The preposition ἐπί (here used with the accusative) has a range of meaning, and is basically relational, “A with B.” Its root thought is “on” or “in.” The NIV Exhaustive Concordance informs us that ἐπί occurs 888 times in the New Testament, and in the NIV this word is translated “on,” “in,” “over,” or “upon” a total of 363 times (Goodrick and Kohlenberger 1990, 1720). For while ἐπί has “a wide range of meaning according to context,” it is a “preposition with a basic meaning *on*” (Friberg, Friberg, and Miller 2000, 162). If that basic meaning is taken here, then it is the paramour, whom the man is “on” or “in” in adultery, who would be clearly meant by αὐτήν.

This word ἐπί is translated “against” thirty-four times and “with” nine times. The concordance gives all 209 occurrences of the word “against” in the NIV text of the New Testament, and the times when this is the translation of the word ἐπί comprise only one sixth of this total (Goodrick and Kohlenberger 1990, 27). And even on many of the occasions when the NIV gives “against” as its rendering for ἐπί, the verses still have the basic meaning of “on” or “upon,” for example, in John 13.25 and 21.20, where “leaned back against Jesus” is ἐπί; also in Acts 8.1, which reads “a great persecution broke out against the church,” meaning “upon the church.”

It could be held then that the underlying thought of the word in this phrase would logically indicate a reference to the woman with whom the man is said to be in adultery (rather than to his now discarded wife)—as indeed a few translators have taken it.

In the light of this uncertainty, it is to be expected that this would be an issue that the various commentators would deal with—especially as μοιχᾶται ἐπ’ αὐτήν is a *hapax legomenon* and because of its uniqueness deserves a considered treatment of its translational options. But it is not given such treatment. I have looked at a range of commentaries and found they ignore the uncertainty. Instead they unhesitatingly—and without discussion—take it (following the translation tradition) that the expression means adultery “against” the first woman, the original wife.

It is commonly mentioned that this idea is a new one, not found elsewhere. Thus, for example, Nineham says,

A woman could commit adultery against her husband, but a man could not commit adultery against his wife; he could only commit adultery against another married man. In view of this, the teaching in v. 11 will be seen as strikingly novel, implying as it does that a man *can* commit adultery against

his wife. . . . That means that in respect of marriages after divorce both parties are put on a footing of complete equality . . . the words *against her* (i.e. the first wife) . . . were probably added to make the novel teaching more precise and definite. (1963, 266)

Similarly Taylor (1966, 419), Lane (1974, 357), Anderson (1976, 244), English (1992, 173), and Edwards (2002, 303-4), amongst others.

That is to say, these commentators recognize that their interpretation produces a novel idea, one that is not supported anywhere else, in the Bible or out of it. But they hold to it nevertheless, on the dubious basis of deciding that ἐπί in this phrase is to be taken as “against.”

They may even draw fanciful implications and conclusions from it. France considers that “the idea of adultery against the wife is a remarkable development towards equality of the sexes” (2002, 394). (So similarly Nineham, above.)

But all those I have seen who refer to the newness of this concept nonetheless opt for this new idea as the interpretation of the verse. So then, how are we to decide the issue? By looking at the context.

## 2. Arguments from the immediate context in verse 11

What is under consideration is deciding upon the antecedent of “her,” αὐτήν. It is not invariable, but normally the antecedent of a pronoun is the proximate word of reference. In this passage that word is ἄλλην “another,” in the wording “and marries another commits adultery ἐπί her.” It is by no means uncommon for the pronoun αὐτός to have as its antecedent ἄλλος “another,” with which it agrees in number and gender; see for example Matt 13.7; 20.6; John 4.38, amongst others. Thus grammatically “her” should be taken to refer to the “another” that the man now marries. It is special pleading to make the pronoun “her” refer back beyond “another” to “wife” instead.

What this man is said to be doing is committing adultery, which is done “with” someone, and the logical expectation is that when the text goes on to mention someone, that someone, αὐτήν, is the person in question, i.e., the partner in adultery. Taking “her” to refer back to the discarded wife is a jump against logic.

What is there in this context that would encourage us to jump over the “another” to refer instead to the original wife? It could be the ambiguity of ἐπί, on the basis that if “with her” had been meant, we would find μετά here instead. Undoubtedly, Mark 10.11 could have used the preposition μετά (and indeed “committing adultery μετ’ αὐτῆς” occurs in Rev 2.22). But μετά has its own range of alternative meanings, including “in company with, in the midst of, be on the side of, stand by, help”—and indeed is also sometimes used with the sense “against.” It could well be thought not to be the ideal word here. Or again, in Mark 10.11 αὐτήν could have been simply an accusative without any preposition (as in Matt 5.28). But that itself is not a common grammatical usage in the Greek New Testament.

Why then should the choice of ἐπί here make one think back to the first wife, thus jumping over the proximate antecedent ἄλλην “another” to choose an earlier word as antecedent, contrary to normal grammatical usage?

The most frequent word which in the NIV is translated “against” is *κατά*, and the most frequent translation that is given for the word *κατά* is “against” (47 times; Goodrick and Kohlenberger 1990, 27, 1738).

The question to ask is, “If ‘against’ were the intended meaning here, why has *κατά* not the word used?” It carries a very clear meaning. Compare (amongst a great many usages) Luke 11.23, “He who is not with me (*μετ’ ἐμοῦ*) is against me (*κατ’ ἐμοῦ*).” If someone were wanting to introduce a new teaching, “against her,” and be clear and precise about it, and to disambiguate the alternatives, the better preposition to use would be *κατά*—whereas on the other hand *ἐπί* is an entirely appropriate word to use of being engaged in an adulterous relationship with someone, in the expression *μοιχᾶται ἐπ’ αὐτήν*.

Rather than consider alternative grammatical usages which might have been employed, let us focus on what is actually found in Mark 10.11. As mentioned above, out of 888 occurrences in the Greek New Testament, *ἐπί* is only translated “against” thirty-four times, and in many of these occasions the primary thought is still that of “upon.” In the use of the word *ἐπί*, of which the fundamental meaning is “on,” the overtones of the word here would resonate with the implications—especially following the word *μοιχᾶω*—of referring to the one “on” whom the man is engaging in a sexual relationship, and not back to the discarded wife. Indeed, in his *Syntax*, Nigel Turner explicitly says that *μοιχᾶομαι ἐπί* has the meaning “[commit adultery] with,” and cites this verse (1963, 272).

### 3. Arguments from the wider context of verse 11

Jesus is here speaking of a man who turns from one woman (his original wife) to take a second woman instead, and he identifies this “changing women” as adulterous behaviour—its nature has not been changed by employing the legal device of divorcing the first in order to marry the second. It is this two-stage “package deal” of “divorce-plus-remarriage” which is under consideration.

The crux of the Lord’s teaching is the action of the man in discarding one woman for another. One’s attitude to the marriage relationship is what is at stake. The man is in effect saying, “Marrying her [the first wife] was a good idea at the time, but now I’ve found someone better, and so I’ll just swap over.” This is the attitude Jesus is condemning. This is adultery. This attitude, if it were to be accepted and acceptable, makes every marriage tentative and temporary in its essence—you are committed to that wife and that relationship just until someone “better” happens along. This is a much more serious matter than a casual adulterous affair (serious though that is). And this is the attitude to marriage, and to the changing of marriage partners, that the Pharisees were endorsing. It is an attitude that significantly weakens the certainty and commitment of the relationship; it strikes at the very fabric and foundation of the institution of marriage.

Thus, what is at issue in this situation is this man’s sexual relationship with the second woman. This new relationship with woman #2 is adultery. So the meaning that is clearly indicated in this verse is that “he is committing adultery *with her*.” There wouldn’t *be* any adultery if he wasn’t getting rid of one woman so as to

take another. Thus in context the “ἐπί her” should logically be taken to refer to the second woman.

### Summary

This is hardly an issue of earth-shattering consequence. Nonetheless it is desirable to clarify our understanding of the meaning of Mark’s text at this point.

It is indeed possible to understand ἐπ’ αὐτήν to mean “against her.” Certainly a significant number of serious scholars have taken it this way (though they do not—so far as my reading goes—ever explain their reason for doing so). However, this would mean—as many commentators have said—that Jesus is introducing quite a new idea by doing this. The idea of Jesus saying the man was committing adultery “against” the first wife is a novel and otherwise unparalleled concept. Nonetheless, they adopt it, and say that that is what Jesus means. But there is no support for the idea that this phrase is setting forth some new teaching, i.e., that adultery is directed in some way *against* the first partner.

I would judge it to be a considerable jump to hold that Jesus would teach a new idea in this fashion. Or, if the intended meaning was “against,” to accept that Mark would use such an ambiguous preposition as ἐπί instead of the clear and obvious choice, κατά, in his record of what Jesus said.

So then, the first argument favouring “with her” is: There is wide recognition (in the references I cited) that for Jesus to say “against her” would be for him to be introducing a new concept. To use the word ἐπί with the intended meaning “against” is a far from obvious choice—for in introducing a new teaching Jesus would want to be clear and definite, not ambiguous and uncertain. It is not reasonable to think that he would be doing so in this manner, by the problematic use of ἐπί, in contrast to adopting the alternative interpretation that Jesus here is referring to the person whom he designates as partner in the adultery.

Moreover, second, the basic idea in ἐπί (on, in, over, upon) is not inappropriate for mentioning a partner in adultery (and to do this would not be introducing a new concept).

Third, the grammatical expectation is that the antecedent of a pronoun (i.e., of “her”) is the proximate relevant word: which in Mark 10.11 is “another” and not “wife.”

Fourth, when one is criticizing a man for adultery (as Jesus is doing in Mark 10.11) and mentions a woman, the normal reasonable expectation in context would be that the person being referred to would be the partner in adultery. Not a discarded wife, unless the wording and/or context makes this departure from expectation quite clear. So then: Jesus is here extending his criticism of the man to include the woman also.

Fifth, the wider context in this verse (that is, the point that Jesus is making overall, which is about a man swapping one woman for another) indicates that having just made mention of the original wife, he is now making reference to the second woman.

I am not aware of any cogent argument or reasoning which supports the alternative interpretation, “against her.” I find that, to the contrary, the evidence indicates the “against her” interpretation to be extremely unlikely. But rather, the interpretation that is supported at every level, from consideration of the meaning of ἐπί in ἐπ’ αὐτήν, to the consideration of its immediate context, to the consideration of its wider context in the verse as a whole, is the meaning “with her,” referring to the second woman. Adultery is occurring in the sexual liaison with the second woman.

From all the above evidence and its implications I conclude that it is a mistaken idea to believe that Jesus would here be focussing his thinking on the man’s act being directed “against” the first woman. This man is not thinking of her—he is thinking of the second woman. And so is Jesus in what he is saying in Mark 10.11.

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