

An Exegetical Brief

John F. Brug

A Puzzling Verb Form

Students of the New Testament have long been puzzled by a strange passive verb in Matthew 5:32, μοιχευθῆναι. The correct interpretation of this verb is very important because of its significance in establishing the scriptural teaching concerning divorce. Is the passive of this verb "to commit adultery" to be translated actively when used of a woman? The husband who divorces the woman "causes her to commit adultery." The use of the passive form when a woman commits an act of adultery does occur in Scripture (see Lv 20:10 in the Septuagint). But it does not seem to be in harmony with the context of Matthew 5 and with the rest of Scripture to translate this passage in a way which suggests that a man who unjustly divorces his wife "makes her commit adultery" if she remarries. Some commentaries and translations render this verb as a true passive, with an expression like "he causes her to be stigmatized as an adulteress." Some have argued, however, that this is not the normal force of the passive of this verb when applied to the actions of a woman (even though Kittel and Liddell and Scott indicate that the verb does have the meaning to "violate" or "debauch"—both of which include the idea of how the woman is viewed by others).

Some light may be shed on this problem by another strange verb which occurs in Deuteronomy 24:4, a *hutqattel* of the verb טָמַא (be unclean). There are only four *hutqattel* forms in the Old Testament. They all have a passive subject and undersubject. The *hutqattel* conjugation also called *Hothpa'al* (Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley, 54h), also has a declarative force. Thus, Deuteronomy 24:4 should be translated, "she had been made to declare herself to be unclean" by her first husband's act of divorcing her. This uncleanness did not result from an act of immorality by the woman nor from her marriage to a second husband, but from the declaration that she had been forced to make by her first husband when he divorced her. The woman is not forbidden to remarry after her first or second marriage. She is only forbidden to remarry her first husband who had caused her to declare herself to be unclean by his divorce action against her. The prohibition of Deuteronomy 24 is really directed against her first husband, not against the woman.

A fuller study of the *hutqattel* and its implications in Deuteronomy 24 may be found in *Hebrew Studies*, 1991, pp 8-17.

A correct understanding of Deuteronomy 24:4 may help solve the problem of Matthew 5:32. The puzzling passive in Matthew may be an attempt to express a grammatical and moral situation which is very like that in Deuteronomy 24. A selfish husband is forcing a wife to declare herself unclean. Greek had no verbal form exactly parallel to the *hutqattel* of Hebrew, but the writer of the Gospel is trying to express a similar thought with the closest form which he had available to him.

The interpretation of the puzzling verb in Deuteronomy 24 may shed some light on the puzzling verb in Matthew 5. The force of the *hutqattel* may be one more bit of grammatical information to be considered by advocates of translating Matthew 5:32, her husband "causes her to be looked upon as an adulteress and whoever marries her is looked upon as an adulterer." This would have approximately the same force as the *hutqattel* in Deuteronomy 24.