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ON THE LOGICAL STRUCTURE OF MATT 19:9

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Few Biblical texts have as many practical theological consequences as the divorce passages in the synoptic gospels (see esp. Matt 5:27–32; 19:1–12; Mark 10:2–12; Luke 16:18; cf. 1 Cor 7:10–16). Various issues in these passages have been repeatedly addressed, including their historical setting, their relation to Jewish teaching and belief at the time, and their relation to each other. But one issue repeatedly suggests itself since it threatens to unbalance the synoptic harmony: the so-called "exception" phrases in Matt 5:32; 19:9. Since so much can be made to ride on such a slender phrase, it is imperative that the phrase be handled with the utmost precision.[1]

Recent attempts have been made to deduce the exact meaning of the "exception" phrase in Matt 19:9 by determining the logical function of the term "except," and it is with attempts along these lines that this paper will deal. The conclusion that we reach, however, may apply to the entire practice of appealing to logical analysis as a means of interpreting problem passages.

Matt 19:9 reads as follows:

> Whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another, commits adultery. (1)

Historically this verse has been interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation asserts that it allows for divorce and remarriage in cases where the divorce was due to the sexual immorality of one of the partners. The second interpretation contends that no such allowance can be inferred from the passage because the scope of the text is limited to the subject of divorces that are not due to immorality.[2]

Recently attempts have been made to clarify this important phrase by appealing to the logical structure of the verse. These attempts have been concerned specifically with the logical function of the term "except."

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[1] When reference is made to the Biblical texts these groups of words are referred to as "exception" phrases, since they are essentially prepositional phrases in Greek. When reference is made to the propositions used in this paper (often stated as "if" clauses) they are referred to as "exception" clauses, since as formulated they are complete clauses. This difference in form should be appreciated in analysis (see below).

[2] For an historical survey and summary of these positions see W. A. Heth and G. J. Wenham, *Jesus and Divorce: The Problem with the Evangelical Consensus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

One such attempt is Phillip Wiebe's "Jesus' Divorce Exception,"[3] where it is argued that Matt 19:9 implies that Christ's teaching permits remarriage after divorce in a case where the divorce was due to sexual immorality:

> "Except" clauses in statements have the effect of producing two propositions. It is from this simple fact that one can derive the view that Jesus' statement in Matthew 19 allows for divorce and remarriage without guilt of adultery.[4]

The two propositions implied by this passage, according to Wiebe, would resemble the following:

In all cases of divorce and remarriage, if the divorce was not for immorality, then adultery is committed. (2)

In all cases of divorce and remarriage, if the divorce was for immorality, then adultery is not committed. (3)

If Wiebe's interpretation of Matt 19:9 is correct and this verse actually does imply these two propositions, then the "except" clause must function as a biconditional, or an "if and only if" connective. In other words, (1) would be equivalent to the proposition:

In a case of divorce and remarriage, a person commits adultery if and only if the divorce was not for immorality.[5] (4)

The "if and only if" clause enables us to infer correctly that remarriage in the case of divorce for immorality is allowed, because part of what (4) asserts is:

In a case of divorce and remarriage, a person commits adultery only if the divorce was not for immorality. (5)

This, then, is the logical form that the verse must take if Wiebe's claim is correct. This interpretation would only be possible if the "except" clause creates a biconditional proposition. But is it correct to assume that the term "except" functions in this way?

Irving Copi writes:

> Such propositions as: "All except previous winners are eligible" . . . are traditionally called exceptive propositions. Any proposition of this form may be translated as . . . a noncompound general proposition which is the universal quantification of a propositional function containing the equivalence or biconditional symbol "$\equiv$".[6]

According to Copi, therefore, propositions that contain exceptive clauses actually are translated into symbolic logic as biconditionals.

So far the approach to the text as we have outlined it seems sound, but we must now determine whether there is another possible way to interpret the function of the Matthean "except" phrase.

[3] P. H. Wiebe, "Jesus' Divorce Exception," *JETS* 32 (1989) 327–333.

[4] Ibid. 327.

[5] $(x)\ [(Dx \cdot Rx) \supset (Ax \equiv {\sim}Ix)]$.

[6] I. M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (6th ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1982) 381.

Many scholars claim that (1), for one reason or another, only implies (2). they claim that (3) cannot be legitimately inferred from (1) because, in one way or another, the context of the verse restricts the subject to that of divorce for reasons other than immorality. In other words, the topic of divorce for reasons of immorality is not addressed in this verse, either directly or indirectly. Hence, they would argue, no conclusions about such divorces can be drawn.

It is clear that this approach denies that the exception clause should be translated into logical notation as a biconditional. The idea that (1) only implies (2) requires that this proposition be expressed as a simple conditional, or with an "if . . . then" connective. In other words, those who hold the more conservative interpretation of (1) must interpret it as being equivalent to:

> For any person who is divorced and remarried, if the divorce was not for immorality, then he commits adultery.[7] (6)

It is obvious that (6) does not imply (3). To assume so would be to commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent. (6) does not imply (3) for the same reason that

> If it is raining, then the flag over the university is not flying (7)

does not imply that

> If the flag over the university is not flying, then it is raining. (8)

The flag may not be flying for any number of reasons: Perhaps it is night, perhaps the flag is being repaired, perhaps the person who usually runs it up the pole is sick. So the flag's absence cannot be taken as an indication that it is raining.

In the same way, if the Matt 19:9 "except" phrase is represented by a simple conditional, the fact that some remarriages are immoral cannot be used to argue that others are therefore not immoral.

So, for those who claim that Matt 19:9 does not necessarily allow remarriage after divorce for immorality, the "except" clause must create a simple conditional proposition. But can the function of "except" ever be legitimately translated into a simple conditional?

It is easy to construct a proposition containing a natural "except" clause that does not seem to function as a biconditional. For example, take the following:

> All basketball centers, except those over six feet tall, will fail in the NBA. (9)

This would seem to be a natural and uncontorted occurrence of the term "except," but it cannot be legitimately expressed as the following biconditional:

[7] $(x)\ [(Dx \cdot Rx) \supset (\sim Ix \supset Ax)]$.

All basketball centers will fail in the NBA, if and only if they are not over six feet tall. (10)

This is an improper interpretation of (9) because it implies that no center over six feet tall will ever fail in the NBA, since part of what (10) asserts is:

All basketball centers will fail in the NBA, only if they are not over six feet tall. (11)

But of course (11) is not consistent with the natural meaning of (9). Instead (9) is best translated as a simple conditional as follows:

For all basketball centers, if they are not over six feet tall, then they will fail in the NBA. (12)

This version does not imply the spurious conclusion that all centers over six feet in height will succeed in the NBA.

Now if "except" clauses can be represented in either of these two ways, depending on the meaning of the proposition in which they occur, the key logical question regarding our interpretation of Matt 19:9 is whether in this case the "except" phrase creates a biconditional proposition or a simple conditional proposition. It is only after this has been determined that we can discover exactly what the verse implies.

One of the purposes of formal logic is to make language precise by ridding it of its ambiguities. For this reason a sentence cannot be analyzed for logical structure until a single, unambiguous meaning has been discovered. As Copi in his discussion of exception clauses notes:

> One cannot translate from English into our logical notation by following any formal or mechanical rules. In every case one must understand the meaning of the English sentence, and then symbolize that meaning.[8]

Hence a sentence that contains the term "except" might be translated as a biconditional (what Copi calls an "exceptive proposition") or a simple conditional. But we must first determine which interpretation is correct before we can translate it into logical notation.

This is the great flaw in simply appealing to logic to settle disputes over problem passages: Problem passages are problematic because they are ambiguous, but logical structure cannot be used to settle linguistic ambiguities because all ambiguities must be removed before a sentence can be represented logically.

So before we can determine the logical structure of (1) we must first decide whether it implies both (2) and (3). Since the interpretation must precede logical analysis, logical analysis cannot be used to help determine interpretation. As Copi writes later in the same passage:

> In general, exceptive propositions are most conveniently regarded as quantified biconditionals. It is clear that exceptive propositions are compounded in the sense explained, but it may not be clear that a given sentence ex-

[8] Copi, *Introduction* 380.

> presses an exceptive proposition. This question is one of interpreting or understanding the sentence, for which an examination of context may be required.[9]

The ambiguity of Matt 19:9 involves problems of semantics, context, and linguistic convention, so it is useless to appeal to logic for clarification. In this case, problems with interpretation can only be clarified by a study of the usage of the term "except" in the original language, its context, and its relation to the other gospels, not by an attempt to find the logical structure of its English translation.

[9] Ibid. 381.