

Erasmus' Exceptive Clause (εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία) in the Divorce and Remarriage Saying (Matthew 19:9): An Assessment

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Abstract

The Protestant/Evangelical view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage is also known as Erasmian view because Erasmus (1466 – 1536) laid the foundation for it as he interpreted Jesus' saying from the Gospel of Matthew. The view rests on the premise that when the divorce is grounded on πορνεία, the innocent spouse has a biblical permission to remarry; otherwise, remarriage would be adultery. In his critical edition of the Greek New Testament, Erasmus made his text read ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία, καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται, thus making the exception (“except for πορνεία) explicitly clear and without ambiguity. This paper comes to the defense of his interpretive text.

Introduction

In Matthew 19:9 (NKJV), Jesus says “whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality [μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία], and marries another woman commits adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Among the long debate with regards to the content and form of the multiple and seemingly contradictory pronouncements in the saying,¹ the clause μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία stands out as *crux interpretatum*. Indeed, as William A. Heth puts it, “within Evangelical Protestant circles, however, the harmonization of the divorce texts appears to be settled with the interpretation that was first set forth by Erasmus, that was then taken up by the reformers, and that subsequently found its way into the confession of faith drawn up at Westminster in 1648. Certainly, this is the predominant

¹ William A. Heth, “Another Look at the Erasmian View of Divorce and Remarriage,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25/1 (1982), 263.

view among contemporary evangelical authors.”² But Heth, an Evangelical himself, initially contested and pointed out what he believed was the errors of the Erasmian position. Heth even went so far as to call the church to abandon its traditional view.³ Later, Heth changed his mind to embrace the Erasmian view.⁴

So far, scholars have taken for granted that $\mu\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ is an exceptive clause. They have not provided literary evidences that it is so. But Allen R. Guenther, in his article “the Exception Phrases: Except *Porneia*, Including *Porneia*, or Excluding *Porneia*? (Matthew 5:32; 19:9),” while summing up the issues, asks some probing questions whether the clause should be understood otherwise.⁵ Erasmus’ interpretive reading on Matthew 19:9 has $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\ \mu\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$, making it a genuine exceptive clause. The purpose of this study is to provide literary evidence to confirm Erasmus’ exceptive clause in the divorce and remarriage saying of Jesus in Matthew 19:9. Detailed discussion on related issues, such as syntax of the clause and the lexical meaning of *porneia*, are beyond its scope.

The Exceptive Clause of Matthew 19:9 before Erasmus

The critical apparatus of UBS⁵ presents two main readings of the exceptive phrase in Matthew 19:9: (1) $\mu\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ ⁶ and (2) $\rho\alpha\rho\epsilon\kappa\tau\omicron\varsigma\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\upsilon\ \rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$.⁷ $\mu\eta\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \rho\omicron\rho\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$ is the reading of the Majority Text.⁸

Early Christian writers extensively referenced and attested the texts of the New Testament. As early as AD 150, the document *Shepherd of Hermas* (Mand. 4.1.4-11) gave an interpretation of the saying on divorce and remarriage, but without making a direct

⁶ This reading is supported by the overwhelming manuscripts, from the 4th on: $\aleph\ C\ L\ W\ Z\ D\ \Theta\ Byz\ (E\ F\ G\ H\ S)\ vg\ arm\ Basil\ Jerome$.

⁷ Witnesses for this reading, from 2nd cent. on include B D Origen Chrysostom.

⁸ See the critical apparatus of NA²⁸ on Matthew 19:9.

quotation of or alluding to Matthew 19:9.⁹ Athenagoras (d. AD 190) (*Legatio pro Christianis* 33), dealt with the Markan text and not with the Matthaean, so his reading does not have the exceptive phrase.¹⁰

Clement of Alexandria (d. AD 215), “except for the cause of fornication” (*Misc* 2.23). Tertullian (d. AD 240), quoted Matthew 19:9, but he wrote in Latin, with the reading *nisi ob fornicationem* “except on the ground of adultery” (*On Monogamy* 19.10). His reading appears to be closer to παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας.

The explicit direct quotation of Matthew 19:9 comes to us from Origen. Our focus is not how Origen understood and interpreted Matthew 19:9, but what was the reading of his text. Origen has been called one of the greatest geniuses of the early church.¹¹ In his commentary on Matthew which was the first ever commentary on the gospel according to Matthew, expressed through his mature thought, he was giving his final word in many topics.¹²

The reading of Origen's Matthew 19:9 text was παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, “except on the ground of πορνεία.”¹³ Whether or not Origen was influenced by Matthew 5:32 and assimilated it to 19:9, does not matter here. It is clear that he understood παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας as having the same sense as μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ.

⁹ According to the *Shepherd of Hermas*, divorce is compulsory over the adultery of the wife, but remarriage, even of the innocent party, is strictly prohibited. The Greek text with English translation is from Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

¹⁰ J. P. Arendzen, “Ante-Nicene Interpretations of the Sayings on Divorce,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 20/79 (1919), 232. Athenagoras' view was no divorce and no remarriage.

¹¹ J. Danielou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (London; New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955), vii.

¹² Ronald E. Heine, trans., *Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 186.

B and D reading *παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας* lends strong support to this view.¹⁴

Erasmian Text of Matthew 19:9

Erasmus was a Catholic Dutch theologian, humanist, and philosopher. Born in the late 1460s in Rotterdam, Netherlands, he died on July 12, 1536, in Basel, Switzerland. Erasmus came to realize that Greek language was “the most essential part of the new learning and the most invidious in the sight of conservative divines. . . preserving the most ancient tradition of both classic and Christian thought and offering authentic solutions for all the problems of religion and science.”¹⁵ Thus, he resolved to make himself master of the ‘sacred tongues [Greek and Latin].’¹⁶ Erasmus has been known for the Erasmian Greek pronunciation in the study of Koine Greek. But, more significantly, he published six critical editions of the Greek New Testament, the first of which was published in March 1516. For the first edition which started in 1515, Erasmus engaged to offer a new edition of the New Testament. His passionate ambition was to bring back the church to its apostolic roots. To do so, he committed himself to correct the Vulgate so that Christendom may possess the Word of God free of its imperfections.¹⁷ His achievement undoubtedly made him a great forerunner of the Reformation.

While preparing his first NT edition for the New Testament, Erasmus “used seven manuscripts borrowed from the Dominican

¹⁴ “It is probable that the witnesses (including B D . . .) that have the former reading [*parektos logou porneias*] have been assimilated to 5.32, where the text is firm.” (Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 1994], 38).

¹⁵ Rachel Giese, “Erasmus’ Greek Studies,” *The Classical Journal* 29/7 (1934), 517-518.

¹⁶ Giese, 526.

¹⁷ Marie Barral-Baron, “The New Testament of Erasmus (1516), accessed March 04, 2024, <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/european-humanism/cultural-heritage/new-testament-erasmus-1516#:~:text=Erasmus%20decided%20in%201515%20to,new%20translation%20of%20the%20work>

Library at Basel and from Johannes Reuchlin, none any earlier than the twelfth century.”¹⁸ Of these, three contained the Gospels: GA 1 [12 cent.], GA 2 [12 cent.], and GA 817 [15 cent.].¹⁹ Erasmus called his edition the *Novum Instrumentum omne*. It was a great success. “However, because the printing process was done in a hurry, the first edition had many editing errors and typos, which were partly dealt with in the ensuing edition(s).”²⁰ Both of the readings μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ and παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας for Matthew 19:9 are present in the mss used by Erasmus. GA 1 has παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας while GA 2 has μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ.²¹

But Erasmus' reading is neither of these. In all of his NT editions, the reading of his Matthew 19:9 is ὅς ἂν ἀπολυση αὐτοῦ, εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην, μοιχᾶται, thus making the clause explicitly an exception. It is noteworthy that Codex Leicestrensis, belonging to f¹³, dated to the 15th cent., reads παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, with a correction in its margin that reads εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ.²² According to Leslie McFall, the general assumption among scholars is that Erasmus saw that marginal reading and

¹⁸ “Renaissance of the Bible: 500th Anniversary of Erasmus' Greek text, the Foundation for Reformation,” accessed March 04, 2024, <https://hc.edu/museums/dunham-bible-museum/tour-of-the-museum/past-exhibits/erasmus-an-the-renaissance-of-the-bible/#:~:text=Though%20Erasmus%20had%20worked%20with,earlier%20than%20the%20twelfth%20century>

¹⁹ Daniel Wallace, “Ask the Prof: How many manuscripts did Erasmus use when he published the first critical edition of the Greek New Testament?,” accessed March 05, 2024, <https://www.csntm.org/2023/05/03/ask-the-prof-how-many-manuscripts-did-erasmus-use-when-he-published-the-first-critical-edition-of-the-greek-new-testament/>

²⁰ Martin Heide, “Erasmus and the Search for the Original Text of the New Testament,” accessed March 04, 2024, <https://textandcanon.org/erasmus-and-the-search-for-the-original-text-of-the-new-testament/>

²¹ The texts are from the Center for the Study of the New Testament Manuscripts (CSNT), <https://manuscripts.csntm.org/>. CSNT does not have GA 817, so the researcher was not able to know its reading.

²² See the text of Matthew 19:9 at https://manuscripts.csntm.org/manuscript/Group/GA_69

incorporated it into his first edition.²³ But after what he called himself a “detective work,” McFall concludes “the corrections in the margin of Codex Leicestrensis could not have been inserted earlier than 1550 when verse numbers were introduced into the Greek New Testament for the first time. Erasmus died in 1536, so he did not see the marginal corrections in the Codex.”²⁴

We should note that Erasmus’ scholarship took place around the Reformation time, when Erasmus himself admitted that there were “wrangling quarrels”²⁵ on theology and praxis of the church. But at no time did he intend to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. He too had a high and biblical view of marriage. His own words are worth quoting: “I want marriage to be something holier and more inviolate.”²⁶ Initially, he did not have a great enthusiasm in discussing, much less writing about marriage and related issues.²⁷ But as Hilmar M. Pabel suggests, Erasmus was “exposing faults and suggesting a change to Church law on marriage.”²⁸ It was in that context that Erasmus expressed his view on divorce and remarriage.

According to McFall, Erasmus deliberately inserted the addition that ended up in the exceptive clause on his own authority.²⁹ For McFall, Erasmus intended to impose his theological view and he was successful in duping the Reformers who were trapped into

²³ Leslie McFall, *The Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage* (Comberton, England, 2014), 10, accessed March 07, 2024, https://www.academia.edu/10729554/Erasmus_and_Divorce_in_Matthew_19_9

²⁴ McFall, 33.

²⁵ Clarence H. Miller, trans., *Collected Works of Erasmus: Controversies – Hyperaspistes 2* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2000), 335.

²⁶ Dean Simpson, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Paraphrase on Matthew* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 105.

²⁷ See Anton G. Weiler, “Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam on Marriage,” *Dutch Review of Church History* 84 (2004), 149-197.

²⁸ Hilmar M. Pabel, “The Impetus for Reform in Erasmus of Rotterdam’s New Testament,” *Erasmus Studies* 38 (2018), 25-54.

²⁹ McFall, 17.

adopt his new teaching.³⁰ Given the serious nature of the allegation, we need to deal with Erasmusian exceptive clause closely.

Erasmus' Understanding

UBS ⁵	GA 1	Erasmus
ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται	ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, καὶ ὁ ἀπελυμένῃν γαμῶν, μοιχᾶται.	ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται, καὶ ὁ ἀπελυμένῃν γαμήσας, μοιχᾶται.
	GA 2	
	ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται	
Whoever divorces his wife, except for <i>porneia</i> and marries another commits adultery	Whoever divorces his wife, except for <i>porneia</i> , causes her to commit adultery. And he who marries her who is divorced commits adultery Whoever divorces his wife, except for <i>porneia</i> , and marries another, commits adultery	Whoever divorces his wife, except for <i>porneia</i> , and marries another, commits adultery. And he who marries her who is divorced commits adultery

Erasmus allows remarriage, only if the divorce was grounded on πορνεία,³¹ hence the phrase “exceptive clause.” His own

³⁰ McFall, 33.

³¹ Thomas R. Edgar, “Divorce & Remarriage for Adultery or Desertion,” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1990), 151-196.

interpretation makes his view clear, “For whoever divorces his wife – unless she is an adulteress (for she has stopped being his wife if she has had sexual relations with another man) – forces her into adultery, since if she marries another man she will marry not a husband, but an adulterer; and he who marries a woman who has been thus repudiated does not marry a wife, but an adulteress”³²

The Erasmian view has been adopted by the majority within the evangelical Protestant circles,³³ obviously through the *Textus Receptus*’ εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ.³⁴ Thus the exceptive clause is explicitly clear in the critical editions of Stephanus in 1550 and Scrivener in 1894 which read ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην, μοιχᾶται· καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσας μοιχᾶται.

For some, Erasmus’ reading εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is a faulty reading/ understanding. The text should remain μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, which, according to Guenther must be understood as “‘apart from *porneia*,’ ‘*porneia* aside,’ or ‘excluding the subject of *porneia*’.”³⁵ McFall concurs and states that translation should be “not over *porneia*.”³⁶ As such, it is an exclusive reading, which rules out any possibility of the ground of divorce. In other words, no one can divorce his wife even if she committed πορνεία. The expansive translation of the saying would be “who, for instance, may *have* divorced his wife—not over fornication *which is punished by death*—and may have married another woman, he becomes adulterous.”³⁷ McFall goes further, “The original Greek text reads: “not over fornication

³² Simpson, *Collected Works of Erasmus: Paraphrase on Matthew* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 105, 271.

³³ Heth, “Another Look,” 263.

³⁴ The term *Textus Receptus* or *TR*, is today “commonly applied to all editions of the Greek NT before the Elzevir’s, beginning with Erasmus’ in 1516.” (William W. Combs, “Erasmus and the *Textus Receptus*,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 1 [1996]: 35).

³⁵ Guenther, 96.

³⁶ McFall, 168. In this case, “*parektos* refers to a total minus one.” (Ibid.).

³⁷ McFall, 10 (emphasis his).

[which was punished by death],” so that Jesus condemned every known excuse to divorce a marriage that the rabbis could think of, besides fornication, because that particular sin had a death penalty punishment attached to it (Deut 22:22; Lev 20:10).”³⁸

But most evangelical scholars do not adopt the exclusive view.³⁹ As matter of fact, literary evidences confirm that μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is indeed an exceptive clause, and in Matthew 19:9, it has the same meaning as εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, as we will see in the following.

Vindicating Erasmus

μὴ ἐπὶ or εἰ (or ἐάν) μὴ ἐπὶ in Classical/Hellenistic Greek

Guenther’s study reveals that classical/Hellenistic Greek has three discernible semantic categories of μὴ ἐπὶ + dative: exclusion, inclusion, and exception.⁴⁰

1. Exclusion: “not”

ἵνα μὴ ἐπὶ τοῖς ὀπλιταῖς ἢ διωρισμένοις πλεονάζειν ἐς τοὺς ἀνευθνοὺς

“So that it may not be in the power of enraged soldiers to exceed their orders.”⁴¹

Τοῦ νομοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ ταῖς ἡλικίας ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τῷ γενεῖ παρασπονδουμένῳ δυσχεραίνοντος

“Since the displeasure of the law is *not* concerned *with ages* but with a breach of faith to the race”⁴²

³⁸ McFall, 15.

³⁹ See below for more on what exclusive view of *mh epi* means.

⁴⁰ Guenther, 93.

⁴¹ Appian, *Roman History, Civil Wars* 4.2.10.20 (trans. Horace White; LCL, 4:156-57).

⁴² Philo, *Special Laws* 3.118 (trans. F. H. Colson; LCL, 7:550, 551).

ἀλλὰ δεῖ παραδχῆναι τον ἡμαρτηκοτα και μενοουντα' μη ἐπι πολθ δε' τοις γαπ δουλοις του θεου μετανοια ἐστιν μια

“In fact, the one [wife] who has sinned and repented must be taken back. But not repeatedly; for there is only one repentance for God’s servants.”⁴³

2. Inclusion (“even though”)

Κάν μη ἐπι δωροις δικαζωμεν

“Even if my judgment is not to be influenced by gifts”⁴⁴

3. Exception (“except for”)

Εἰν μη ἐπι φρεσιθηκ' Ἀγαμεμνονι πτνια ἼΗρη αὐτω ποιπνυσαντι θωωσ ὀρτυναι Ἀχαιοις

“had not queenly Hera put it in Agamemnon’s mind himself to bestir him, and speedily rouse on the Achaeans.”⁴⁵

Οὐδ' ἂν ἐμφυσησαι τοις αὐλοις δυναιντο, οἱ ἂν μη ἐπι τεχνη μηδε προσεχοντες ξυνωσιν

“Yet they could not even blow on the pipes unless they associate with the pipers for professional ends and pay strict heed.”⁴⁶

Admittedly, the examples with the exceptive sense above have εἰ μὴ (or ἂν μὴ). Nevertheless, grammarians, such as Blass,

⁴³ Hermas, *Mand.* 4.8. The Greek text and translation are from Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 510, 511.

⁴⁴ Lucian, *Dearum Iudicium [Judgment of the Goddess]* 12.11 (trans. A. M. Harmon; LCL, 3:402, 403).

⁴⁵ Homer, *Illiad* 8.218 (trans. A. T. Murray; LCL, 1:354-355).

⁴⁶ Dio Chrysostom, *Oratio Homer et Socratus* 55.5.5 (trans. H. Lamar Crosby; LCL, 4:384, 385).

Debrunner, and Funk recognize that μὴ can be used to indicate exception.⁴⁷

Meaning of μὴ ἐπὶ + dat. in Matthew 19:9

The clause μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ of Matthew 19:9 falls under one of these three options. According to Guenther, μὴ ἐπὶ in Matthew 19:9 “does not mean ‘except’ as has traditionally been interpreted. Had the Gospel writer wanted to introduce an exception, he would have used εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ or ἔαν μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ.”⁴⁸ Guenther’s reading of the text is thus, “whoever divorces his wife (apart from/excluding/not introducing [the factor of] πορνείᾳ) and marries another commits adultery.”⁴⁹ But such translations are “highly unlikely renderings of the Greek;” on the contrary “the phrase should be taken as a genuine exception.”⁵⁰

The clause παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας in Matthew 5:32 has been generally considered as a genuine exceptive clause. That is not the case for the μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ of Matthew 19:9. Nevertheless, early copyists and commentators (as witnessed in B D, Origen, Basil) seemed to have understood that both sayings are closely related, and the exceptive clauses therein, are equivalent. We have noted earlier that the mss available to Erasmus on Matthew 19:9 have both μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ and παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας. Erasmus must have understood that μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ could be rendered as παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, and vice-versa. Even modern commentators, such

⁴⁷ F. Blass, A. Debrunner and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 10th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 221. Unfortunately, no specific literary evidence as example is given.

⁴⁸ Guenther, 95.

⁴⁹ Guenther, 95. “*Porneia* aside,” “excluding the subject of *porneia*.” Aside from the meaning of *porneia*, this reading follows New Jerusalem Bible.

⁵⁰ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22 (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1992), 292; also the later view of B. Vawter, “Divorce and the New Testament,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977), 528-42. Vawter’s earlier view was exclusive (B. Vawter, “The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5:32 and 19,9,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16/2 (1954), 155-167).

as C. Lenski, affirms “the wording is different, but the sense is quite the same.”⁵¹ Donald A. Hagner observes that if the exclusive view were correct, “we should expect “μηδε, ‘not even,’ rather than the simple μη.”⁵² Therefore, μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is an ellipsis⁵³ of εἰ μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, which, for Erasmus, comes as an interpretive reading of Matthew 19:9.⁵⁴ Literary evidences demonstrate that μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ is an ellipsis of εἰ μη ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, thus, it is indeed an exceptive clause, “except for”

Support of the Earlier Commentators and Manuscripts

Origen, in the early third century, in his *Commentary on Matthew* understood that the clause under consideration in Matthew 19:9 is indeed an exceptive clause. He wrote, “but it might be a subject for inquiry if on this account He hinders any one putting away a wife, unless (*ean mh epi*) she be caught in fornication.”⁵⁵ The same is for Basil, though he had adopted the reading παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας,⁵⁶ which is unambiguously an exceptive clause.

The Input of the Parallel Text in Matthew 5:32

The saying on divorce and remarriage in Matthew 19:9 necessarily evokes and brings into view the one in Matthew 5:32,

⁵¹ Lenski, 733. “[*mh epi porneia*] is the equivalent of the phrase in 5:32: *parektos logou porneias*.” (Ibid, 549).

⁵² Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Book Publisher, 1995), 549.

⁵³ “Ellipsis consists in the omission of a word, the idea of which, although it is not actually expressed, must still be supplied in the mind of the reader.” (George B. Winer, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. Moses Stuart and Edward Robinson [Andover: Flagg and Gould, 1825], 170).

⁵⁴ Other scholars, such as Craig L. Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990), 175, and Ben Witherington, “Matthew 5.32 and 19.9 – Exception or Exceptional Situation? *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985), 571, equally support that *mh epi porneia* is an ellipsis of *eiv mh epi porneia*.

⁵⁵ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 12.24.44.

⁵⁶ Basil, *Regulae Morales* 31.852.23.

where *παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας* is generally perceived as a genuine exceptive clause,⁵⁷ and translated as such.⁵⁸ Thus, the two sayings (Matt 5:32, Byz, and Matt 19:9, UBS⁵) are placed in parallels and similarities and differences between them are drawn:

ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχᾶσθαι

ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται.

Some important observations may be made:

(1) The exceptive clause significantly renders the sentence conditional which would consequently make remarriage adulterous or not.

(2) While the emphasis of Matthew 5:32 is on the adulterous remarriage of the divorced wife, the emphasis of Matthew 19:9 is on the adulterous remarriage of the divorcer.

(3) The firm exceptive reading of Matthew 5:32, *παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας*, and the same reading for Matthew 19:9 as witnessed by two important early manuscripts B and D, further strengthens the idea that the treatment of the saying with the exceptive clause in Matthew 19:9 should be done in tandem with Matthew 5:32. It is

⁵⁷ Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 1994), 38. Hans D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 248, concurs, “the sentence [Matt 5:32] consists of a legal opinion comprising two consecutive, casuistic definitions, the first of which is provided with an additional exception clause.”

⁵⁸ “Except for πορνεία” (HCSB, ESV, JB, KJV, MSG, NKJV, NIV, NLT, RSV, NRSV, ASV, CEB, CJB, GNT, LEB, NCV, WEB, WNT, Darby, Tyndale, YLT), “excepta fornicationis” (Latin Vulgate), “sauf pour cause d’infidélité” (LSG), “ausgenommen aufgrund von Unzucht”(MNT).

no surprise that the exegetical reading *παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας* was the reading of Origen on Matthew 19:9.

(4) With # 3 above in mind, it is safe to consider that *παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας* has the same meaning as *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ*.

μὴ = εἰ μὴ in Classical and Hellenistic Greek

Based on several literary evidences, Guenther notes a “high proportion of occurrences of *mh epi* to *ei mh epi* or *ean mh epi*.”⁵⁹ *Ei* (or *ean*) functions as “subordinating conjunctions.”⁶⁰ According to the Liddel Scott Jones (LSJ), *Lexicon*, *μὴ* in dependent clause, when used with the participle, resolved into a conditional clause.⁶¹ For the construction *μὴ + part.* = *εἰ μὴ + ind.*, the LSJ provides several literary examples, with the full text and translation in the table below.

Author	Text (μη + part.), LCL	Text (εἰ μη + ind.) as in LSJ	Translation, LCL
Herodotus ⁶²	ἀπενεικας μεν γαπ κεφαλην της ληιης μεταλαμβανει την ἀν λαβωσι, μη ἐνικας δε οὖν	ἀπενεικας μεν γαπ κεφαλην της ληιης μεταλαμβανει την ἀν λαβωσι, εἰ μη ἦνικε δε οὖν	For he receives a share of the booty taken if he bring a head, but not otherwise.
Aeschylus ⁶³	Οὐδε, σαφ'οἶδα, μη ματη φλυσαι θελων.	Οὐδε, σαφ'οἶδα, εἰ μη ματη φλυσαι θελεις	I know fully well, unless he were fain to babble idly

⁵⁹ Guenther, 94.

⁶⁰ Guenther, 94.

⁶¹ LSJ, “mh.”

⁶² Herodotus 4.64 (LCL, 2.262, trans. A. D. Godley).

⁶³ Aeschylus *Prometheus* 504 (LCL, 1.258, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth).

Aeschylus ⁶⁴	Μη δολωσαντος θεου	Εἰ μη ἔδολωσε θεου	Unless some god hath played me false
Sophocles ⁶⁵	ὅταν δ' ἴκηται, τηνικαυτ' ἐγω κακος τηνικαυτ' ἐγω κακος μη δρων ἄν εἰνην πανθ' ὅς' ἄν δηλοι θεος	ὅταν δ' ἴκηται, τηνικαυτ' ἐγω κακος τηνικαυτ' ἐγω κακος εἰ μη δρων ἄν εἰνην πανθ' ὅς' ἄν δηλοι θεος	But when he comes, then I were base indeed, if I perform not all the god declares

Erasmus' εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ

The literary evidences presented above have demonstrated that the clause in Matthew 19:9, μὴ + implied part. [ἀπολύων] + ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, is equivalent to εἰ + μὴ + implied part. [ἀπολύων] + ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ, making the clause an exeptive clause,⁶⁶ i.e. “except for πορνείᾳ.” The evidences are so compelling that even Vawter and Heth changed their mind to vindicate Erasmus.⁶⁷

We may say that Erasmus followed some sort of Targumic tradition with its interpretive translation to make the Hebrew Bible understandable for the Jewish worshippers around the time

⁶⁴ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 273 (LCL, 2.26, trans. Hebert Weir Smyth).

⁶⁵ Sophocles *Oedipus* 77 (LCL, 1.10, trans. F. Storr).

⁶⁶ Blomberg, “Marriage, Divorce, and Celibacy,” 176, concludes that “μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ” of Matthew 19:9 is a “genuine exception” (emphasis supplied). The vast majority of translations read the same (HCSB, ESV, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRS, ASB, NASB, NIV, NLT, CEB, CJB, GNT, NCV, YLT, DRCB, Tyndale, Wicliffe), “sauf pour infidélité (LSG), “nisi ob fornicationem” (Latin Vulgate).

⁶⁷ See footnote # 4 above.

of the New Testament.⁶⁸ In this, Erasmus rendered a great service to the readers of Matthew 19:9. In fact, Erasmus was not alone. Subsequently, he had the support of the marginal reading of the Codex Leicestrensis, the critical editions of Stephanus (1550), Beza (1565), Scrivener (1894), and the Textus Receptus.

The three readings of the saying in Matthew 19:9 are placed in parallels:

ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμῆσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται (κ)

ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, καὶ γαμῆσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται (D)

ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ⁶⁹ καὶ γαμῆσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται

(Erasmus, Stephanus, Beza,
Scrivener, and TR)

Conclusion

This paper presented Erasmus' exegetical clause and assessed its tenability in the divorce and remarriage saying of Matthew 19:9. After considering literary evidences, we may state that Erasmus' interpretive reading is sound. *μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ* in Matthew 19:9 is indeed (1) an ellipsis of *εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ*, and (2) has the same meaning as *παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας*. Instead of duping the Reformers as some had said, he rendered them a great service in the understanding of difficult text of the Bible. We too are indebted to him for the same.

His interpretive text reads *ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμῆσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται* which could be translated "whoever divorces his wife, except for *πορνεία*, and

⁶⁸ Targumic rendering, in Aramaic language, was necessary, after the Babylonian exile (see D. F. Payne, "Targums," *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall et al. [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 1996], 1152).

⁶⁹ Luther's German translation has, "es sei denn um der Hurerei willen," clearly reflecting *εἰ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ*.

marries another, commits adultery.” The Demotic Modern Greek translation is fully in line with it: Σας βεβαιώνω πως ὅποιος χωρίσει τη γυναίκα του, για ἄλλον λόγο εκτός από πορνεία, και παντρευτεί ἄλλη, διαπράττει μοιχεία. But our study has just established that what is commonly called an exceptive clause in Matthew, is really exceptive. Important studies remain to be done, such as the syntax of the exceptive clause, the lexical and contextual meaning of πορνεία which for now is assumed as “adultery,” and a full exegesis of the divorce and remarriage saying.