

JAKUB SŁAWIK¹

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0001-7867-7714](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7867-7714)

“For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth” – Proposal of a new interpretation of Matt. 19:12²

**„Są bowiem eunuchowie, którzy takimi się urodzili z łona
matki” – nowa propozycja interpretacji Mt 19,12**

Key words: New Testament, logion, eunuch, marriage, LGBTQ+ people

Słowa kluczowe: Nowy Testament, logion Jezusa, eunuch, małżeństwo, osoby LGBTQ+

Abstract

A detailed historical and critical analysis of Jesus' words in Matt. 19:10-12 in relation to the immediate (Matt. 19:3-9) and further context. I argue for a broad understanding of Jesus' logion about the three categories of eunuchs. All of them may have evoked aversion or even disgust among Jesus' and Matthew's audience. Even if Jesus wanted to make his disciples aware of the weight of giving up normal married life and having offspring in view of the approaching kingdom of heaven, in his logion He endorses all three groups of "eunuchs". The contemporary implications of these words entail an openness to all who do not fit into the norm of the heterosexual family with children.

¹ Dr hab. Jakub Sławik, Wydział Teologiczny Chrześcijańskiej Akademii Teologicznej w Warszawie.

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Streszczenie

Szczegółowa historyczno-krytyczna analiza słów Jezusa z Mt 19,10-12 w powiązaniu z bliższym (Mt 19,3-9) i dalszym kontekstem. Opowiadam się za szerokim rozumieniem logionu Jezusa o trzech kategoriach eunuchów. Wszyscy oni mogli budzić wśród odbiorców Jezusa i Mateusza niechęć czy wręcz odrazę. Nawet jeśli Jezus chciał uświadomić uczniom wagę rezygnacji z normalnego życia małżeńskiego i posiadania potomstwa wobec przychodzącego królestwa niebieskiego, Jego logion dowartościowuje wszystkie trzy grupy „eunuchów”. Współczesne implikacje tych słów zakładają otwartość na wszystkich, którzy nie mieszczą się w normie heteroseksualnej rodziny posiadającej dzieci.

In His logion in Matt. 19:11-12, Jesus identifies three groups of eunuchs: 1) those who have been eunuchs from birth, 2) those who have been made eunuchs as a result of human intervention, 3) those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The interpretation of the logion is different in the churches that trace their roots to the Reformation and in the Roman Catholic Church, which sees in it the basis for the celibacy of priests. Nevertheless, until the Middle Ages the logion had not played a major role (cf. Luz 1997, 103). Unlike the third group, the meaning of the word “eunuch” in the first two groups seemed clear. The vast majority of contemporary commentators believe that in their case, the meaning is literal, i.e. persons physically incapable of sexual intercourse, marriage and having offspring,³ whereas it is figurative with regard to the last group mentioned, where it refers to persons who have renounced sexual life and having offspring. How broadly can and should the term “eunuch” be understood, if in two instances a eunuch is supposed to be a person with a physical defect or mutilation, and in one describes a mental, psychological or emotional commitment to the kingdom of God. To what extent is such a distinction justified and how should one interpret the juxtaposition of these three categories? There is also another possibility of framing these words of

³ Another possibility is put forward by France 2007, 724-725 (for more, see below).

Jesus, which has been brought to my attention by a careful reader of the Bible, an eminent director and documentary filmmaker, Agnieszka Arnold (cf. Slawik, Arnold 2020).

Since Jesus’ words in vv.11-12 are a lesson given to the disciples (v.10) surprised by what they heard from the mouth of Jesus in his dispute with the Pharisees over the possibility of divorce (vv.3-9), it is necessary to look at the discussion with the Pharisees first. Also, we must consider the cultural context of both the activities of Jesus and the Matthean congregation(s), which is/are supposed to be Judeo-Christian (cf. Luz 1989, 62-65), i.e. derived from the Judaism of the time.

1. Matt. 19:3-9

After Jesus had left Galilee (vv.1-2)⁴ and made his way into Judea (on the other side of the Jordan),⁵ with crowds following him (vv.1-3),⁶ the Pharisees questioned him, putting him to the test (vv.3-9). This discussion, in contrast to vv.10-12, has its parallel in Mark 10:2-9. Therefore, the source for Matthew’s Gospel must have been the account in Mark’s Gospel (cf. Mark 10:1-12). The accounts of the two Gospels are not identical. The most important difference is that when Jesus explains the prohibition of divorce by referring to adultery in Mark’s Gospel, he does so not in his conversation with the Pharisees but with his disciples, and makes no exception for sexual immorality (πορνεία). In Mark 10:11-12, the prohibition applies equally to men and women. Whereas in Matthew’s Gospel, the discussion has a more precise and clear structure, with the addition “for any cause” at the end of the Pharisees’ question and more order in Jesus’ explanation, who first refers to a general principle based on humans being created by God.⁷

⁴ For a description of the wider context cf. Paciorek 2008, 242-244.247.

⁵ For the location and its vagueness cf. Luz 1997, 92.

⁶ From Galilee? Thus Grundmann 1986, 427. According to Luz 1997, 92, those following Jesus are the potential Church.

⁷ Matthew’s version is similarly assessed by, among others, Schweizer 1976, 249.

In Matt. it is pointed out in advance that the intentions of the Pharisees were not good (πειράζω; cf. Matt. 16:1). They do ask a question, but in fact they already have an opinion on the matter. They are probably trying to discredit Jesus at least in the eyes of part of the audience,⁸ knowing that the issue at hand is socially controversial, and that Jesus' position on divorce is relatively radical (cf. Matt. 5:31-32). They want him to answer whether a wife can be divorced for any reason (v.3).⁹ The question of divorce as such was not a matter of dispute, neither Judaism or the Roman-Greek world of the time. Its existence was a matter of course.¹⁰ There was, however, an argument in Judaism about the grounds based on which it was permitted to send away one's wife, with the pretext being the only place in the Torah that speaks of a bill of divorce (Deut. 24:1-4; cf. esp. France 2007, 206-207.212) given when something disgraceful or indecent is found in one's wife (עֲרֻתָּהּ דְּבָרָה).¹¹ This expression allowed for a wide variety of interpretations. The School (House) of Shammai¹²

For details, see especially Luz 1997, 90-91.

⁸ Cf. Homerski 1979, 271: "because it involved a very sensitive issue of everyday life".

⁹ According to Fiedler 2008, 309, Matt. (as well as Mark) is supposed to use not the typical divorce word ἐξαποστέλλω – "I send away" (cf. Deut. 24:1-4 LXX), but ἀπολύω as the former was too loaded theologically. Yet ἀπολύω is regularly used in the New Testament for the dismissal of a wife (cf. *GDW*, 193). In contrast, [ἐξ]αποστέλλω in LXX is the customary equivalent for the Hebrew verb שלח, also found in Deut. 24:1 (cf. Rengstorf 1949, 399-401; *GDW*, 552), so it could hardly be considered a term for divorce.

¹⁰ For the background to the divorce discussion briefly presented below and references to the relevant testimonies cf. commentaries, esp. France 2007, 206-208; Gnilka 1989, 76-78, Grundmann 1986, 427 and Grundmann 1980, 271; also Homerski 1979, 271; Luz 1997, 92 and fn. 20.

¹¹ עֲרֻתָּהּ literally means "nakedness", here certainly used in a figurative sense – cf. *HAHAT*, 1012; France 2007, 207 and fn. 101. For the difficulties of interpretation and the probable legal meaning of the expression (accusing one's wife of adultery is the same as declaring her unclean, which is different from being caught in the act, punishable by death – Deut. 22:22) cf. Otto 2017, 1802-1805.

¹² At the time of Jesus and early Christianity, there were two major (rabbinic) Schools: of Hillel and of Shammai, strongly differing in their interpretation of the Law

represented a rather strict position according to which divorce was permissible in cases of the wife’s sexual impurity or infidelity. In contrast, the School (House) of Hillel interpreted “something disgraceful” very broadly, with even “burnt food” considered a possible reason.¹³ Both Shammai and Hillel allowed or even ordered divorce in cases of long-term infertility. Indeed, under Gen. 1:28, conceiving children was a religious obligation. Marriage and fertility belonged inseparably to each other. In the case of adultery, sending away the wife was not only permissible, but even commanded (cf. Luz 1997, 94 and fn. 35 {Relevant testimonies are cited}; also Schrage 1982, 96). The freedom in divorce is illustrated by Flavius Josephus’ mention that he sent his wife away because he disliked her behaviour. As a matter of fact, he considered it permissible to divorce for any reason (cf. also, not uncontroversially, Sir. 25:26; *Life of Josephus*, § 76 and *Antiquities of the Jews* IV.8.23 – cf. France 2007, 208¹⁴). Only a man was supposed to have the right to send away his wife in Judaism, but there are reports of a different practice in the Jewish community from at least the beginning of the 2nd century AD (cf. France 2007, 207 fn. 98). Mark 10:12 takes the possibility of divorce on the initiative of a woman into account, perhaps because in the Roman world a woman had the right to divorce her spouse as well (Thus France 2007, 207 fn. 99; cf. also Gnllka 1989, 76-770¹⁵). In any case, divorce and remarriage was not an oddity in Palestine at the time, and the bill of divorce was intended to allow for another marriage to take place without risking

– cf. Conzelmann, Lindemann 1991, 179.

¹³ Later, Rabbi Akiva goes even further, as for him finding a more attractive woman was reason enough.

¹⁴ A different interpretation of Sir. 25:13-26 in Sauer, 191-192: The text does not speak of marriage but of more loose relations between the sexes.

¹⁵ However, in text-critical terms, Mark 10:12 is uncertain (cf. NA28 and Gnllka 1989, 75, who ultimately chooses a different teaching, i.e. that the text refers to an abandoned woman).

accusations of adultery. Divorce was a relatively simple matter (cf. esp. Gnilka 1989, 76 {Successive bigamy was widespread}; France 2007, 721).

Jesus (also because he is aware of the trap?)¹⁶ does not directly answer the Pharisees' question, but refers to Scripture (vv.4-6). The rhetorical question: "Have you not read" (v.5) highlights¹⁷ that, as much as for Jesus, Scripture should be the basis of the Pharisees' teaching. Moreover, they themselves should know the answer to the question (which thus corresponds to the narrator's assessment of the Pharisees' words as a test). Jesus refers to Gen. 1: "He who created them from the beginning made them male and female" (cf. Gen. 1:27), applying these words to marriage,¹⁸ and linking them to (v.6) Gen. 2:24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh."¹⁹ From this Jesus derives the conclusion (v.6) that "they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."²⁰ While the verb συζεύουμι is supposed to derive from "to yoke together", in Greek literature it was indeed used to refer to marriage (cf. *GDW*, 1548; Luz 1997, 94 fn. 40). Thus, we cannot conclude that Jesus viewed marriage as compatible with God's will on the one hand as a difficult reality of human existence and on the other (cf. Grundmann 1980, 272-273). Jesus' argument is clear, and his reference to Scripture and creation emphasises the importance

¹⁶ Gnilka 1989, 78, considers a similar question in Mark to be a trap, since a positive answer would make Jesus a pimp and a negative one would be tantamount to speaking against the Law, whereas according to Langkammer 2014, 175, any answer by Jesus would lead to the accusation of being too harsh or too lax.

¹⁷ The rhetorical question is an emphasis ("you have read, after all") rather than accusation of ignorance of Scripture, as Paciorek 2008, 249 would like to believe.

¹⁸ Cf. Luz 1997, 93 et al, somewhat differently in Grundmann 1986, 427-428: human sexuality, but notes that at the time the text was used in Palestine in discussions around marriage.

¹⁹ It is generally believed that Gen. 2:24 in both Mark and Matt. is quoted after the *LXX* because of the word δύο – cf. e.g. Grundmann 1980, 272.

²⁰ From this, Homerski 1979, 271, draws the conclusion that marriage is a "union of divine origin".

of the thesis. However, the Pharisees raise an objection (v.7), pointing to Moses' injunction to give the woman a bill of divorce and send her away. Jesus explains (v.8) that Moses allowed for the wife to be sent away because of the human (he directs these words as an accusation against the Pharisees' "your") heartlessness (σκληροκαρδία). Such hardness of heart in Mark 16:14 stands next to lack of faith (ἀπιστία; cf. *GDW*, 1510) and means "that which leads a person to sin" (cf. Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4 and Sir. 16:10-11 [LXX]).²¹ Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus does not speak of an obligation (ἐντέλλομαι; v.7) but of a possibility (ἐπιτρέπω) to send one's wife away.²² Although Moses supposedly made it possible to send one's wife away, this had been different in the beginning (v.8b alludes to the principle Jesus outlined in vv.5-6). The precedence of the old over the younger was a widespread rule (see also the parallel text in Mark 10:2-9).²³ Pharisees are sometimes accused of invoking the word of Moses against the acts of the Creator (cf. Luz 1997, 94), and Jesus on the other hand is said to have used the word of Scripture against the word of Scripture.²⁴ Such juxtapositions are not justified, since the dispute is about the correct interpretation of Scripture.²⁵ Jesus also refers to "Moses" (v.8), not by contrasting it with God's creative action,

²¹ Cf. also Luz 1997, 94 fn. 52: "the 'inner side' of sin"; France 2007, 720: a term used to describe rebellion against God.

²² The opposite is the case in Mark 10:4-5, where the Pharisees speak of permission and Jesus speaks of obligation, referring to a regulation from Moses' Torah, a commandment his disputants were familiar with (see Gnilka 1989, 71). According to Grundmann 1980, 271, Mark thus shows that it is not human wishes that are fundamental but God's will.

²³ Cf. Schweizer 1976, 249, referring to New Testament and non-biblical Christian testimonies; Luz 1997, 95-96, who believes that such a hierarchy in the interpretation of the Torah stood in opposition to the mainstream Judaism of the time, and that the actual parallels are found not in Judaism but in Christianity (Gal. 3:17; Rom. 4:9-10).

²⁴ Thus Gnilka 1989, 73, about the dispute in Mark 10:1-12.

²⁵ Cf. France 2007, 713, who argues that Jesus raises an important hermeneutical issue and finds two different levels of ethical instruction in the Torah: an essential, positive principle based on Gen. 1-2 and a pragmatic resolution to the problem at hand found in Deut. 24:1-4.

but by explaining the permission to issue the bill of divorce by human weakness. It is difficult to imagine that Jesus, unlike the Pharisees, would not regard the Torah as God's law (cf. France 2007, 719).

Much like in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. especially 5:28.32.34.39.44), Jesus adds (v.9) his own instruction (λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν) to this interpretation of Scripture (cf. Homerski 1979, 272; Grundmann 1986, 428). He excludes divorce with the exception of πορνεία, i.e. any sexual iniquity of the wife, especially adultery (cf. Luz 1989, 273-274 and Luz 1997, 97).²⁶ Only the woman could commit sexual unfaithfulness (πορνεία) and this act could in fact mean the end of the marriage, the severance of the union of "one flesh".²⁷ Another wedding would be equivalent to adultery, transgression of the commandments (μοιχάω is a word also used in the Decalogue in Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18; cf. Hauck 1942, 738).²⁸ The text is not precise enough.²⁹ Firstly, the exception of πορνεία can mean both the necessity and the possibility of divorce. Given the fact that there was earlier mention of a concession allowed by Moses (Torah of Moses), the second possibility is more likely. Secondly, does this exception apply only to divorce or to remarriage (by a man)? The accusation of adultery (μοιχάω) might not have applied to a man who sent his wife away because of πορνεία. The analogous prohibition formulated in 5:32 (cf. also Luke 16:28)³⁰ places the blame solely on the woman who has been sent

²⁶ Πορνεία has a broader meaning than μοιχάομαι, referring not only to adultery, but also to any sexual intercourse outside the legal or moral framework. Πορνεία was also used figuratively (cf. Old Testament נָפְתָר a stem translated in LXX as πορν-), especially to denote the unfaithfulness of a people to their God – cf. HAHAT; Kühlewein 1984, 518-520; Erlandsson 1977, 612-619; Hauck, Schulz 1959, 579-595; GDW, 1389; Slawik 2017, 88-89.

²⁷ This is not changed by the fact that "one body" is a metaphor – cf. France 2007, 718.720.

²⁸ According to Gnlika 1989, 77, a similar position was held by Philo (*De Specialibus Legibus* 3:30-31).

²⁹ More extensively in Luz 1997, 98; followed by Paciorek 2008, 251.

³⁰ According to Luz 1989, 274, a role may also have been played by stylistic considerations or the fact that πορν- was used more to refer to women, while μοιχ- to men.

away because of unfaithfulness, so that one may assume that here Jesus extends it also to the man.³¹ On the other hand, a softer interpretation in the spirit of 5:32 is also possible, allowing a man to remarry in the event of his wife’s infidelity. However, such an alternative (resulting from more contemporary disputes?) is misleading, since divorce was meant precisely for the purpose of entering into another marriage (cf. France 2007, 212).³² For Judaism of the time, remaining unmarried was not an option. The prohibition of divorce for any reason other than the wife’s adultery safeguarded the woman’s welfare or interests, not only by not allowing for her to be treated as an object, but also by protecting her dignity, as sending her away might have raised suspicions about her fidelity (hence Joseph’s intention to secretly leave Mary, not wishing put her to shame – Matt. 1:19; cf. Grundmann 1980, 272 and France 2007, 211). It might seem that the exception of *πορνεία* is inconsistent with the general rule based on creation (v.5-6), which precludes any divorce.³³ However, it is no accident that in Matt. the Pharisees ask about divorce “for any reason” (v.3). Jesus forbids divorce for any reason with the single exception of *πορνεία*. The exception not change the fact that divorce is fundamentally contrary to God’s will and ultimately leads to a violation of God’s commandments.³⁴ Matthew’s Jesus is not portrayed in sharp contrast to Jewish traditions; his position is close to that of the House of

³¹ According to Grundmann 1986, 428, we are dealing here with a legal clarification. Such an interpretation, a sharper one has also been chosen by Fiedler 2008, 311.

³² Differently in Fiedler 2008, 311 or Paciorek 2008, 251, according to whom in the case of unfaithfulness Jesus only allows for separation.

³³ Thus Luz 1997, 97, who argues on this basis that a practice from Christian churches had been put into the mouth of Jesus; similarly Homerski 1979, 272.

³⁴ According to Langkammer 2014, 176, “once a marriage is concluded, it is unbreakable under any circumstances”, which corresponds to the general principle but contradicts v.9a.

Shammai.³⁵ The reaction of the disciples (v.10) shows that it is not just contemporary readers that have difficulties accepting Jesus' radicalism.

2. Matt. 19:10-12

2.1. Translation

10. His disciples said to him,³⁶

“If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.”

11. But he said to them,

“Not everyone can receive this word,³⁷ but only those to whom it is given.

12. For there are eunuchs who have been so from the womb of the mother,

and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs (εὐνοουχίζω)
by men,

and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the
sake of the kingdom

of heaven.

Let the one who is able to comprehend this comprehend it.”

2.2. Commentary and interpretation

The disciples' reaction (v.10) refers to Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question (αἰτία), certainly to both vv.4-6 and v.8-9. Jesus' insistence on the permanence of marriage and the defining any remarriage as adultery appears to the disciples as too difficult or even out of touch. So much so that celibacy seems to be the only way out. They are shocked or even

³⁵ According to Schweizer 1976, 249; Fiedler 2008, 310, Jesus' view corresponds to that of the House of Shammai; France 2007, 210 is somewhat more cautious.

³⁶ Although the pronoun “his” left out in some relevant textual testimonies, it is well attested (for this cf. NA28 or Paciorek 2008, 253 fn. a). Is it because of the typical use of possessive pronouns in Hebrew? Luz 1997, 90, does not include it in his translation, unlike Grundmann 1986, 426.

³⁷ The indicative pronoun is well attested in the main textual testimonies (see NA28) and substantively fully justified (see Luz 1997, 90 fn. 4; Paciorek 2008, 253 fn. b).

horrified by Jesus’ instruction (cf. Paciorek 2008, 255-255).³⁸ The verb *συμφέρω* indicates not only what is good or beneficial (cf. *GDW*, 1557), but also what is proper or just. It is a characteristic term for the Matthew redaction used to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong (cf. Slawik 2017, 36-41 {And the literature cited therein}). Marriage turns out to be a threat that exposes a person to the danger of breaking God’s commandments, of committing the sin of adultery. And yet divorce was conceived as a privilege that enables remarriage and, in the case of infertility, offers a chance to have children.³⁹

Jesus, however, does not rebuke the disciples at all. On the contrary, he recognises that the matter is not self-explanatory (v.11).⁴⁰ The verb *χωρέω* means “to make room” in the first place, and, referring to intellectual processes, “to understand”, “to comprehend”, which includes affirmation of or obedience to the object of comprehension (cf. *GDW*, 1773-1774; Luz 1997, 107-108; Slawik 2017, 41). Only those to whom it is given are able to receive the teaching of Jesus. The passive form of the verb must be interpreted as *passivum divinum* (cf. Matt. 13:11), i.e. the acceptance of this teaching is based on God’s grace (cf. 19:25-26; thus Luz 1997, 108 and fn. 116). “This word”⁴¹ could refer to Jesus’ teaching from the preceding verses.⁴² However, the closest point of reference is the immediately preceding statements of the disciples about the superiority of celibacy,⁴³ especially as the verb *χωρέω* returns again at the end

³⁸ According to Grundmann 1986, 428, the disciples’ question shows their cluelessness in the face of Jesus’ *halakha*, and according to France 2007, 722, it is humorous. The reaction of the disciples can also be seen as somewhat ironic.

³⁹ Cf. above and, inter alia, Grundmann 1986, 429; Luz 1997, 108; Paciorek 2008, 255.

⁴⁰ Homerski 1979, 273, even thinks that “Jesus follows the disciples’ line of reasoning: because of the hardship of married life, it is better to adopt a celibate state”.

⁴¹ *Λόγος* is not only a “word” but also a “matter” – cf. France 2007, 712 fn. 11.

⁴² Thus most commentators, e.g. Luz 1997, 108 or Grundmann 1986, 429.

⁴³ Thus France 2007, 723, according to whom the teaching of Jesus would be in a sense meaningless, as he could not hope for comprehension and acceptance anyway, since it requires a special gift.

of v.12. While Jesus' radical *halakha* of vv.4-6.8-9 had parallels in the Judaic circles of the time (School of Shammai), to renounce marriage and having children was something unheard of (see below). Thus, the accepting comprehension that requires a gift probably refers to the disciples' request and, above all, to Jesus' teaching in v.12 (τοῦτου similar to the Hebrew indicative pronoun could have a cataphoric meaning, referring to the content of v.12). Vv.11 and 12d form a frame for Jesus' words in v.12 (thus Paciorek 2008, 255).⁴⁴ Either way, Jesus' *halakha* about the indissolubility of marriage and adultery and the logion about celibacy and renouncing procreation are closely related.⁴⁵

Jesus explains or justifies (γὰρ)⁴⁶ his position against renouncing marriage (v.12). The word εὐνούχος means a man who is castrated (infertile) or deprived of his genitals (making sexual intercourse impossible).⁴⁷ The origin of this practice is unknown, but seems to be attested from the Middle Assyrian period (towards the end of the 2nd millennium BC, also 2 Kings 17:18 may suggest the existence of eunuchs later in Assyria) and especially in Persian times (Book of Esther and Herodotus; cf. Jendrek 2019). The etymology of the Old Testament word קָרִים is uncertain, most likely coming from Akkadian. In Akkadian it was the title of a high court official. Since it sometimes appears in opposition a bearded man, it may indicate a beardless, castrated person.⁴⁸ It also appears to simply denote a eunuch. Similarly, in the Old Testament קָרִים is primarily an official title. It refers both to a high official in the royal

⁴⁴ Cf. above all the discussion in Schweizer 1976, 249.

⁴⁵ Though not as Fiedler 2008, 312, would have it, i.e. that the logion about the eunuchs is meant to illustrate the necessity of renouncing remarriage.

⁴⁶ On the meaning of this conjunction cf. *GDW*, 304-305.

⁴⁷ While these should be distinguished, the texts often do not make it possible to determine whether it is "just" castration or the removal of the penis as well – cf. Jendrek 2019.

⁴⁸ On קָרִים in the Hebrew Bible and the translation in the *LXX* cf. especially Kedar-Kopfstein 1986, 948-954, on etymology cf. 949-950 and *HAHAT*, 903; also Jendrek 2019.

court and to a eunuch. In the case of officials, apart from exceptions, it is not certain whether the people referenced by it were castrates (cf. esp. Schneider 1977, 764). It is also conceivable that in some cases the two meanings overlap. The Old Testament knows of the existence of כְּרִיסִים outside Israel (Gen. 37:36; 39:1; 2 Kings 18:17; 20:18, especially Est. 1:10.12.15; 2:3, etc.), as well as in Israel and Judah (1 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 22:9, etc.). According to Deut. 23:2, where the term כְּרִיסִים is not used, those with a severed penis or squashed testicles were excluded from the congregation of YHWH, i.e. from participation in worship (cf. Otto 2016, 1752 and Jendrek 2019).⁴⁹ It is therefore not surprising that such a man could not be a priest (Lev. 21:20). However, in Isa. 56:3-5, eunuchs, compared to a withered tree, were promised a share in eternal salvation provided they kept the covenant (analogously the apocryphal/deuterocanonical Wis. 3:14). In the Septuagint, כְּרִיסִים is usually translated as εὐνοῦχος (twice as σπάδων, i.e. “castrated” – in Gen. 37:36 and Is. 39:7, in Jer. 34:19 as δυνάστης, “ruler”, and in 2 Kings 18:17 as a proper name). In contrast, in the LXX the verb εὐνοουχίζω does not appear (cf. Schneider 1977, 764-765 and Jendrek 2019). In the New Testament, apart from Matt. 19:12, the noun εὐνοῦχος is found only in Acts 8:26-39, where it certainly denotes an actual eunuch (cf. Schneider 1977, 736 and 766; Roloff 1988, 140; Jendrek 2019).⁵⁰ Since the rabbis viewed marriage and having children as an obligation, the inability to conceive children was considered a disgrace and a misfortune (cf. also Sir. 30:20; cf. esp. Schneider 1977, 765 {*Tosefta Yevamot* 4:8}), and castration was forbidden

⁴⁹ According to Kedar-Kopfstein 1986, 954, accidental genital injury could not be frequent enough to be reflected in the law, so that it must have been about (cultic) self-mutilation. Animals with mutilated or deformed genitalia could not be sacrificed (Lev. 22:24).

⁵⁰ Differently, however, Pesch 1986, 290-296, especially 291 (high official), for whom the conclusion of the story is simply that a pagan is baptised (not that a eunuch is baptised). For the rabbis, marriage entailed an obligation to have offspring and they viewed the renunciation of marriage negatively cf. Schneider 1977, 765.

(cf. also Luz 1997, 109-110).⁵¹ Flavius Josephus regarded castration as a barbaric, pagan practice and condemned self-castration (*Against Apion* II.38 and *Antiquities of the Jews* IV.8.40 – cf. France 2007, 724 fn. 37). Herodotus or Xenophon attest to a more ambiguous attitude towards castrates: castration was used to punish war prisoners; on the other hand, castrated slaves were also particularly trusted and could gain considerable political influence (according to Kedar-Kopfstein 1986, 951).

Jesus names three groups of eunuchs. The first are those who are born such. The phrase “from the womb of the mother” is a typical biblical expression (LXX: Judg. 16:17; Isa. 49:1; Ps. 21:11; 70:6; Job 1:21; Wis. 7:1; cf. Luz 1997, 109 and fn. 122) for the election, care or calling of a person or a people before birth (cf. Isa. 44:24) or at birth (Ps. 71:6). Thus, these are people who were born with malformed male genitalia or otherwise incapable of marriage and having children. The second group consists of those who have been castrated or deprived of genitalia (εὐνουχίζω; cf. *GDW*, 654) by people. The general wording does not allow to specify whether he referred to forced or voluntary castration.⁵² It is therefore best to assume that Jesus had all such persons in mind. A similar distinction between “eunuchs of the sun/heaven” and “eunuchs of man” is known in Jewish, early rabbinic literature (*Yevamot* 8:4-6; cf. Schneider 1977, 765-766 and Luz 1997, 109-110). Jesus adds another group of eunuchs who castrated themselves or removed their genitals (εὐνουχίζω). They differ, however, from the second group of persons deprived of manhood by people for the reason or for the purpose (διὰ)⁵³ of castration: “for

⁵¹ It remains an open question to what extent the rejection of certain foreign cults is behind such a prohibition.

⁵² Cf. Jendrek 2019, according to whom the wording covers both possibilities. If high officials were castrates, it can be assumed that castration may have been voluntary. The case was similar for castrated priests in the cults of Cybele (identical to the Syrian Goddess [De Dea Syria] – cf. Luz 1997, 110 and https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dea_Syria [19.08.2020], described in Περὶ τῆς Συρίας Θεοῦ), Attis or the Ephesian Artemis – cf. Schneider 1977, 763.

⁵³ For the meaning of this preposition (followed by acc.) cf. *GDW*, 363-363; Luz

the kingdom of heaven”, i.e. the divine reign that comes with Jesus.⁵⁴ Although the phrase could be understood literally, as exemplified by Origen,⁵⁵ a figurative interpretation has always dominated (cf. Luz 1997, 106-107): it refers to the renunciation of sexual life and marriage (cf. Luz 1997, 110).⁵⁶ The figurative interpretation is backed up by the prohibition of physical castration in Judaism at the time,⁵⁷ as well as the Apostle Paul’s and the early Church’s rejection of the need for physical mutilation (circumcision) and Paul’s characterisation of celibacy as a gift (1 Cor. 7:1-17; cf. especially v.7: *χάρισμα*). Moreover, in his advice, Paul warns against making the renunciation of intercourse and marriage a rule in the Church.⁵⁸ The text does not explain why people, for the sake of the kingdom of God, should give up marriage and sexual intercourse.⁵⁹

1997, 110.

⁵⁴ For the imagery of the kingdom of God and Matthew’s phrase “kingdom of heaven” cf. Luz 1989, 144-145.

⁵⁵ As reported by Eusebius (*Church History* VI.8.1-3) – cf. France 2007, 724 fn. 35. However, later he was to take a negative view of submitting to castration – cf. Schneider 1977, 766.

⁵⁶ Whereas Fiedler 2008, 312, who would like to merge 3-9 and 10-12 into one, believes that the renunciation of marriage only applied to the divorced, who, by being oriented towards the kingdom of God, gained the strength for such renunciation. On the other hand, according to Grundmann 1986, 429, the text refers to the mystery of celibacy, and according to Langkammer 2014, 176, it refers to voluntary celibacy which “through physical incapacity, [is] wanted and realised by one”.

⁵⁷ As argued by Schneider 1977, 766.

⁵⁸ For a cautiously critical assessment of grounding celibacy on these words cf. Luz 1997, 104-106 and 111-112.

⁵⁹ This question is probably most often answered as follows: in order to have time to serve or preach the kingdom of God, in order not to waste time and energy on the concerns of married life and child-rearing or more broadly on the needs of daily life – cf. Luz 1997, 111. Schrage 1982, 94, observes that celibacy for the kingdom of God is not about asceticism or merit, and that its grounds are eschatological. According to Homerski 1979, 273, “celibacy as an authentic expression of this religiosity [...] the cause of God’s Kingdom comes before other human needs” and reaches “to a supernatural reality”.

The ending of Jesus' logion refers to its beginning: not all are able to accept this, but he who can, should accept it, make room for such a thought (*χωρέω*). The matter of eunuchs is more difficult to accept than the matter of the permanence of marriage. Tact that these words are addressed only to the disciples seems to suggest that only the Church or believers, those to whom it is given, are able to accept celibacy and not having children. In the Jewish circles of the time such an approach was unheard of. The suggestion that Jesus meant and applied the idea of celibacy only to himself, John the Baptist and some of the disciples, i.e. to a very narrow group, is unlikely if only because their celibacy is never discussed anywhere⁶⁰. The emphasis that not everyone can receive it may also be due to the fact that Jesus touches on one of the deepest conditions or needs of human life.

This also leads to the question whether the first two groups of "eunuchs" were only mentioned to make the disciples realise what an extraordinary reality they are/we encountered in the kingdom of God. If it had been so, then only the third group would be qualified as clearly positive.⁶¹ This view is contradicted by the fact that the three categories were juxtaposed without any additional valuation. All three groups may aroused resentment or even disgust among Jesus' and Matthew's audiences, but Jesus places them on the same level. The fact that the kingdom of God is open to all, eunuchs included, is attested to by the story told in Acts 7, which also fulfils the prophetic words in Isa. 56:3-5. It is therefore difficult to imagine that the Church should be closed to all those who, for one reason or another, cannot have intercourse and procreate or have renounced married life and children. The approaching kingdom of God puts married life and procreation into a new

⁶⁰ On this silence and the problematic nature of celibacy even in relation to Paul cf. France 2007, 722 fn. 27 and 28 (and the literature cited there).

⁶¹ Cf. Paciorek 2008, 256, who goes even further and describes the inability of the first two groups to marry as "lamentable".

perspective.⁶² The kingdom of God is available to all: to those who give them up by being singularly oriented towards this kingdom; to those who have been deprived, voluntarily or not, of the ability to have intercourse or children; and finally to those who have been born without such ability. Given the very general definition of the three groups and the use of the word “eunuch” in a figurative sense, there is no reason to assume a very narrow, literal meaning of the first two, i.e. apply them only to people whose apparent physical impairment or mutilation prevents them from marrying and/or having children. Psychological⁶³ and even social factors may also come into play. Given the contemporary broadening of the discussion to include the issue of sexual orientation, gender identity and role,⁶⁴ it is possible and necessary to include people with non-heterosexual orientation and gender identity in the category of eunuchs “from the womb of the mother”.⁶⁵ It does not change the fact that non-heterosexual people sometimes want to form relationships with equal rights as heterosexual married couples and that they can or

⁶² Or the command to procreate formulated in early Judaism and sometimes in church circles to this day based on Gen. 1:28.

⁶³ Already Jerome (in his commentary on Matt.) did not limit the interpretation to a purely physical dimension: “There are eunuchs from their mother’s womb who are of a rather frigid nature and not inclined to lust” (Jerome 1964, 218; cited also in Paciorek 2008, 257).

⁶⁴ On the distinction between sexual orientation and practice and gender identity and role cf. Nissinen 1998, 9-14 and Slawik, Slawik 2010, 11-12.

⁶⁵ The possibility of applying, in the light of contemporary problems, the term “eunuch” to those who are psychologically not inclined to heterosexual intercourse and parenthood is considered by France 2007, 724-725. In rejecting such a possible interpretation, he uses the historical argument that there is no evidence for such an understanding of homosexuality in the ancient world. Any possible references would have been to what is today called bisexuality, and the choice faced by such individuals would hardly fit the “eunuch by birth” description (inverted commas in France 2007). However, limiting ourselves only to such a strictly historical meaning would make many contemporary interpretative models inapplicable to ancient texts, because, after all, we cannot find attestation to their existence in those times. In my view, this would carry the risk of sending the Bible back to a trove of ancient and no longer useful texts.

do have children. The logion refers explicitly only to men and to heteronormative marriage (and having children - in ancient times there were no other ways to have children than natural conception and birth or adoption). Furthermore, from today's perspective, Jesus' words can and should also be applied to women. While such an approach somewhat reverses Jesus' argument, which aimed to make the disciples realise the importance of giving up normal married life in the face of the coming kingdom of heaven, Jesus' word still acknowledges all three groups of "eunuchs". Whether Jesus and/or Matthew assumed the contemporary implications of these words would be difficult to argue, which is not to say that they are misguided. The question of how we interpret the biblical texts in relation to current categories for understanding the world is not only fully valid, but even imperative. It is impossible to derive from Jesus' (and the Church's) openness to all those who, for various reasons, do not or cannot lead a "normal" married life, that it should be restricted to those merely physically incapable of marriage and having children. Such a restrictive interpretation would go in the opposite direction of Jesus' words, which imply an acceptance or appreciation of those who, because of their failure to lead a married life, were and are despised, considered inferior.

3. Matt. 19:3-9.10-12 – Conclusions

Jesus' ideals are radical also from today's perspective. The first of these is the permanence of marriage. Matthew's exception of sexual infidelity changes little in this regard. A new marriage, which was an obvious consequence of divorce, is adultery. Besides, the parallel accounts of Mark (10:11-12) and Luke (16:28) do not speak of any exception to this principle. The exception of *πορνεία* only shows that Jesus and/or the evangelist recognised that the ideal is shattered by human existence tainted by sin. Hence, Jesus' attitude towards those committing adultery or sexual impurity was very flexible (John 4:5-30; 7:1-11; cf. also 1 Cor. 7:12-17). There is also no doubt that today both the ideal of the

permanence of marriage and the exception of sexual infidelity equally apply to women. One could easily name situations in which the continuation of marriage would be a misfortune or tragedy.⁶⁶ The acceptance of divorce and remarriage is evident not only from a purely human perspective, but also on the basis of the fundamental Christian principle of loving one's neighbour (Mark 12:28-35; Matt. 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-28), which is the criterion for assessing the validity of all commandments, injunctions and prohibitions (Rom. 13:8 and Gal. 5:14; cf. also Slawik, Slawik 2010, 64-67). While divorce is accepted for these reasons, we do not abandon Jesus' ideal of the permanence of marriage.⁶⁷ Every divorce is the result of human weakness, it is a failure.⁶⁸

An unmarried and childless life due to one's commitment to the cause of God's kingdom or God's saving reign seems to be a value forgotten in Protestantism (cf. Luz 1997, 105-106). In the Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, it has become the norm required of priests. From Paul's recommendation (1 Cor. 7:12-17) and a special eschatological gift, it has been transformed into a requirement that proves difficult to fulfil (as the Apostle Paul was already aware). Although Jesus' logion shows how the salvific reality established by him can have an overwhelming impact of on human life, but it does not introduce celibacy as a general rule, just an honourable exception.

⁶⁶ Luz 1997, 100-103, argues that modern interpretations of Jesus' teaching must take into account that it was given on a sociological background that involved a very different model of marriage and family, based not on individual goals or love-based choice, but rather on the welfare or future of a large family. On the other hand, marriage and family were and still are one of the fundamental institutions of patriarchal social control, and the text in particular seems to be completely silent on the interests of women (is it a relic of Jewish/priestly purity laws?).

⁶⁷ Cf. Fiedler 2008, 311; France 2007, 714-715, according to whom this ideal marks the point from which one starts a discussion about ethics or seeks the right way to live one's life.

⁶⁸ According to Schweizer 1975, 111, divorce is a sign of penance, a confession of guilt on the part of two that they have failed to live according to God's will.

Today, the teaching about “eunuchs” takes on additional significance. Jesus respects all those who, for various reasons, cannot lead the most socially acceptable life, i.e. as a heterosexual family with children. In Poland in particular, they are denied equality in the Church and society, whereas Jesus taught about their dignity and equality in the kingdom of God.

Jesus repeatedly argued that the kingdom of God has room for the despised and for every sinner, for adulterous women (Luke 7:37-50; John 4:5-30) or tax collectors (Mark 2:14-17 and parallel verses in other Gospels; Matt. 10:3; Luke 18:9-14; 19:2-10, etc.). In contrast, the way to the kingdom is closed to those who consider themselves righteous and better than others (Luke 18:9-14).

4. Summary

Jesus' logion in Matt. 12:(10.)11-12 is a direct continuation of the discussion with the Pharisees in vv.3-9 about the possibility to send away one's wife. Both passages deal with the issue of marriage. Jesus posits the ideal of the permanence of marriage (vv.3-9), which primarily protects the welfare of the woman. At the same time, he recognises that in reality it is not always possible to live up to the ideal, e.g. in case of sexual infidelity. Since Jesus classified divorce and remarriage as adultery, the surprised disciples conclude that marriage is a risk (v.10). In response to the disciples, i.e. the Church, Jesus acknowledges those who do not fit into the ideal of marriage and procreation (vv.11-12). He names three groups referred to as “eunuchs”: those who have been born that way, those who have been made incapable of marriage and/or having children by other people, and those who have renounced it themselves for the kingdom of God. The very general wording as well as putting the three groups on an equal footing leads to an interpretation that includes in these categories all those who, for various reasons, be it physical, psychological or social, do not fit into the ideal of heterosexual

marriage, including women (the text is only concerned with men) and LGBTQ+ persons.

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Wykaz autorów

Jakub Ślawik, j.slawik@chat.edu.pl, Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna w Warszawie, ul. Broniewskiego 48, 01-771 Warszawa

Grzegorz Olek, g.olek@chat.edu.pl, Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna w Warszawie, ul. Broniewskiego 48, 01-771 Warszawa

Serhii Shumyło, institute@afon.org.ua, Institute of History of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 126 Velyka Vasylykivska St., of.1, Kyiv, Ukraine 03151

Andrzej Borkowski, a.borkowski@chat.edu.pl, Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna w Warszawie, ul. Broniewskiego 48, 01-771 Warszawa

Panagiotis Tzoumerkas, tzoumerkas@past.auth.gr, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Faculty of Theology, School of Social Theology and Christian Culture, 54124 University Campus, Thessaloniki – Greece

Piotr Nowak, p.nowak@chat.edu.pl, Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna w Warszawie, ul. Broniewskiego 48, 01-771 Warszawa

Borys Przedpełski, b.przedpelski@chat.edu.pl, Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna w Warszawie, ul. Broniewskiego 48, 01-771 Warszawa