

# ἄσέλγεια in Mark 7:22

G. THOMAS HOBSON

The article argues that Jesus euphemistically refers to homosexual behavior and similar sexual offenses against the Jewish law by use of the term ἄσέλγεια on his list of sins that “defile the human heart” in Mark 7:22-23. The article examines the use of ἄσέλγεια by Jewish, pagan, and NT writers, and uses the Syriac translation to attempt to identify the original Aramaic word used by Jesus in this verse and what he may have meant by it. Jewish writers use ἄσέλγεια to refer to what they considered to be shocking violations of the sexuality taught in the Torah.

It is commonly claimed that Jesus never speaks one word about homosexuality. However, one can argue to the contrary that he actually speaks two. As we look at his list of sins in Mark 7, we find two words that arguably include homosexual behavior within the scope of their meaning. One is the term πορνεία (sex outside of marriage), a word which has been much studied and commented upon<sup>1</sup>. The other is the word ἄσέλγεια, a word on which precious little study has been done<sup>2</sup>.

William Barclay considers ἄσέλγεια to be possibly the “ugliest word” in the list of NT sins<sup>3</sup>. He capsulizes the word’s meaning as “utter shamelessness”. It is variously translated as “licentiousness”, “wantonness”, and “lasciviousness”. It’s a word that Jesus (translated through the tradition that Mark presents) could easily turn to as a synonym for homosexual activity and other similarly shocking behavior forbidden by the Jewish law.

The word ἄσέλγεια first appears in a fragment from Eupolis in the fifth century BC. It is rare and late in the papyri<sup>4</sup>, and no listing is found in any of its forms in *PGL* for the patristic period. The Perseus search

<sup>1</sup> See F. Hauck and S. Schulz, πορνεία, *TDNT* VI, 579-95. Both *TDNT* and *BADG* define πορνεία as referring to “every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse”, although neither dictionary gives specific examples where the word is used to refer specifically to homosexual intercourse.

<sup>2</sup> The major article on this word is W. Havers, “Wortgeschichtliches”, *Indogermanische Forschungen* 28 (1911) 194-202. In addition to entries in the standard lexicons, see also Leo Meyer, *Handbuch der Griechische Etymologie* (Leipzig 1901) 166-7; and Pierre Chartraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la Langue Grecque* (Paris 1968) 122.

<sup>3</sup> W. Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London 1964) 60.

<sup>4</sup> In *P. Ox.* 903,21 (fourth century AD), a writer complains about someone who has been hurling “vulgar abuses” (ἄσελγήματα) at him. *P. Lond.* 1711,34 (AD 570) uses ἄσέλγεια in a sexual context (with κοίτης). And *P. Cair. Masp.* 367305 (AD 568) uses ἄσέλγεια together with ἄσωτίας (“debauchery”).

engine at Tufts University finds at least 62 uses of ἀσέλγεια in 29 classical works, plus 52 uses of the adverb ἀσελγῶς in 34 works, not counting its appearances as a verb, an adjective, and in compound form<sup>5</sup>. Countless additional uses of the root are found in the patristic period. Among pagan authors, the root is used most frequently by Demosthenes, Polybius, Philostratus, and Plutarch. According to W. Havers<sup>6</sup>, the basic meaning is “verrückt, wahnsinnig” (crazy, insane), from which it developed the meanings “liebestoll, wohlüstig” (love-crazed, lustful), and “unzucht” (promiscuous); it appears to come from an original ἐλεγαίνω<sup>7</sup>.

Ἀσέλγεια is mostly used to denote extremes of either violence (it is often paired with ὕβρις and/or βία), sexual licentiousness, or insolence. All three meanings express a senseless shamelessness that knows no limits.<sup>8</sup> Plutarch uses ἀσελγαίνειν as the opposite of σωφρονεῖν or “to practice self-restraint” (*Lib. educ.* 13.A.10).

Plato (*Symp.* 190c) speaks of the ἀσέλγεια of men who dare to assault the gods themselves with the intent of taking their place. Demosthenes (*Con.* 54.4.7) uses the word to describe the behavior of men who were dumping chamberpots on the slaves of their host. Plutarch (*Apoph. lac.* 233.A.3) tells of men from Chios who deliberately vomited at dinner and soiled the chairs they sat on with excrement, prompting their Spartan hosts to say, “The Spartans grant Chians permission to be utterly gross (ἀσελγαίνειν)”.

Some specific examples from Plutarch help to narrow down what kind of behavior is intended when ἀσέλγεια is used to refer to sexual misdeeds. In *Par. Min.* 311.A.5, Smyrna falls in love with her father Cinyras and tricks him into consorting with him in the dark. When Cinyras finds out the truth, he pursues this “most wanton woman” (τὴν ἀσελγεστάτην) with the sword. In *Par. min.* 314.A.11, Phaedrea is described as “the wanton woman” (ἡ ἀσελγής) for falling in love with her step-son and pursuing him. And in *Pel.* 28.5.1, Plutarch speaks of a woman oppressed by a tyrant who, “in addition to his other debaucheries (ἀσέλγεια), had made her youngest brother his paramour”.

<sup>5</sup> www.perseus.tufts.edu.

<sup>6</sup> Havers, *IF* 195.

<sup>7</sup> *LSJ*, s. v. ἐλεγαίνω: “to be wrathful, wanton, violent”.

<sup>8</sup> J. B. Lightfoot (*Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: A Revised Text With Introduction, Notes, and Dissertations* [London 1890] 210-1) calls ἀσέλγεια “an open and reckless contempt of propriety...In classical Greek the word ἀσέλγεια generally signifies insolence or violence toward another, as it is defined in Bekker's *Anecd.* p. 451, ἡ μετ' ἐπιφροασμοῦ καὶ ὀρασσύτητος βία. In the later language, in the New Testament for instance, the prominent idea is sensuality, according to the loose definition in *Etym. Magn.* ἐτομιότης πρὸς πᾶσαν ἡδονήν: comp. Polyb. xxxvii.2 πολλὴ δε τις ἀσέλγεια καὶ περὶ τὰς σωματικὰς ἐπιθυμίας αὐτῷ σὺνηκολούθει. Thus it has much the same meaning as ὕβρις.”

Demosthenes accuses a man of treating his slave-girl ἀσελγῶς by having sex with her openly at parties (*Neaer.* 59.33.1). Philostratus (*Vit. Apoll.* 4.42.18) speaks of a character who dresses naked except for a girdle around the waist, “like the most licentious (ἀσελγέστατοι) of tavern customers”; he also speaks disparagingly of a gang of men who violated all standards of wantonness (ἀσελγεστάτα) with the wife of a certain man (*Vit. Apoll.* 3.20.40). Finally, a Cynic writer (Heraclitus, *Epistle* 7.5) complains of “a single young man who through licentiousness (ἀσέλγειαν) is the lover of an entire city”.

Ἀσέλγεια appears twice in the OT Apocrypha and once in the Greek OT proper. In Hos 7,14, Aquila and Symmachus retranslate the LXX’s “they wail on their beds” (κοίτιας) as “they have spoken lasciviously” (ἀσελγῶς ἐλάλησαν), evidently employing ἀσελγῶς in a sexual sense<sup>9</sup>. In the LXX, 3 Macc 2,26 refers to the unspecified “countless ἀσέλγειας” of Antiochus IV. And Wis 14,26 juxtaposes ἀσέλγεια with μοιχεία, along with γαμῶν ἀταχία (“disorder/confusion of marriages”), γενέσεως ἐναλλαγῆ (NRSV: “sexual perversion”), and ψυχῶν μιασμός (“defilement of souls”).

Jewish writers almost always use this word in its sexual sense. It appears that what βδέλυγμα was to idolatry, ἀσέλγεια was to πορνεία: sin taken to its most disgusting degree. In his comments on Gal 5,20, J. B. Lightfoot writes, “A man may be ἀκάθαρτος and hide his sin; he does not become ἀσελγής, until he shocks public decency”<sup>10</sup>. The term may have been used to refer to what were regarded as the most shameless violations of the sexuality taught in the Torah. For instance, in *T. Levi* 17,11, the Jewish writer lumps “licentious persons” directly together with “the lawless, pederasts, those who practice bestiality.” Philo (*Spec.* 3:23) uses the word to describe the “lewdness” of marriage to one’s own sister.

Josephus (*B. J.* 4.9.10 §562) speaks of a Zealot named Simon and his comrades who invade the Temple during the insanity of 68 AD and proceed to imitate the dress and passions of women, devising in their “extreme lasciviousness” (ὑπερβολὴν ἀσέλγειαν) unlawful pleasures and wallowing as in a brothel. Josephus also tells (*A. J.* 20.5.3 §112) of a Roman soldier on guard in the Temple portico during Passover who uncovers and exposes his genitals to the multitude; he laments the fact that 20,000 stampede and die that day because of the “indecent behavior (ἀσέλγεια) of one soldier”.

Josephus tells (*B. J.* 1.22.3 §439) of the Jewish princess Mariamne “carrying wantonness (ἀσέλγεια) so far...as to exhibit herself to a man”.

<sup>9</sup> It would appear that Aquila and Symmachus misunderstood על-משכבתיהם to mean “about their promiscuities” rather than “upon their beds”.

<sup>10</sup> Lightfoot, *Galatians* 210.

In his description of the Essenes (*B. J.* 2.8.1 §121), Josephus says that they protect themselves against women's "wantonness" (ἀσέλγεια), because they are persuaded that no woman remains faithful to one man. And in his comments on pagan religion, Josephus (*C. Ap.* 2.1.34 §244) condemns the licentious unions of the Greek deities as "the utmost in outrageousness" (ἀσελγεστάτον).

Whatever it is, one can see why ἀσέλγεια appears on Jesus' sin list.

Ἀσέλγεια is used ten times in the NT. In Rom 13,13, Paul urges his readers to conduct themselves "not in promiscuity (κοίται) or licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια)." Paul includes this term among the deeds of sinful human nature in Gal 5,19, sandwiched in between illicit sex (πορνεία), impurity, idolatry, and witchcraft.

In 2 Cor 12,21, Paul laments those who "have not repented of the impurity, πορνεία, and ἀσέλγεια they have practiced." And in his description of the Gentiles in Eph 4,19, Paul says, "They have become callous and have given themselves up to ἀσέλγεια, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness." Likewise, ἀσέλγεια tops the list of objectionable Gentile behaviors in 1 Pet 4,3, followed by "passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry".

Second Peter uses ἀσέλγεια more than any other NT document. It links ἀσέλγεια explicitly with the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, picturing Lot (2 Pet 2,7) as "greatly distressed by the licentiousness (ἀσέλγεια) of the wicked" around him (probably not referring to their failure to show hospitality). The author likens the men of Sodom to the false teachers of his day: "uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions (ἀσέλγεια) people who have barely escaped from those who live in error" (2 Pet 2,18). He warns that "many will follow their licentiousness, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled" (2 Pet 2,2).

Among the earliest Christian writers, ἀσέλγεια is used only by the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas*, who uses it four times. In *Vis.* 6,2, Hermas makes reference to "licentious acts" (ἀσελγείας) in parallel to "lawless deeds" (ἀνομίαι), with no contextual clues as to his meaning. The context in *Vis* 15,2 is equally vague. In *Man.* 47,6, Hermas says that the commandments of the devil are "hard, bitter, wild, and licentious" (ἀσελγέσι). Finally, in *Sim.* 92,3, Hermas sees women in black garments named Disbelief, Lack of Self-Control, Disobedience, Deceit, Sorrow, Wickedness (Πονηρία), Licentiousness (Ἀσέλγεια), Short Temper, Lying, Foolishness, Slander, and Hatred. In his use of the word, Hermas seems to have returned to the word's earlier classical Greek usage: shocking behavior of any kind that transcends the bounds of decency.

In a search of patristic works, ἀσέλγεια and its cognates is used three times by Justin Martyr (*Apol.* 2.3.2; 4.9.2; 9.4.1), twice by Melito (see

below), 43 times by Clement of Alexandria, 34 times by Origen, 17 times by Eusebius, 34 times by Athanasius, 40 times by Cyril of Alexandria, 44 times by Basil of Caesarea, 23 times by Epiphanius, and 306 times by Chrysostom. The patristic writers use the word in both sexual and non-sexual senses. Its most common single use in the patristic period is in quotes from Gal 5,19.

In the patristic writers (such as Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autol.* 3.3.12), ἀσέλγεια forms part of a standard trio of vices with πορνεία and μοιχεία, all three ostensibly sexual in nature. It arguably parallels Boswell's "triple prohibition": οὐ πορνεύσεις, οὐ μοιχεύσεις, οὐ παιδοφθορήσεις found in Barnabas (19.4), the *Didache* (2.2), Clement of Alexandria (*Prot.* 10.108.5.2; *Paed.* 2.10.89.1.2), and Athanasius (*Synt.* 1.5.1-2)<sup>11</sup>. (Boswell notes that John of Damascus uses ἀρσενοκοιτίας as the third element in his trio of sexual vices in *Sacra parallela* 2.11.)

In his sermon *On the Passover*, Melito uses the triple combination of ἀσέλγεια, πορνεία, and μοιχεία (364). He then describes as ἀσελγέστερα (388) cases where "father cohabits with his child, and son with his mother, and brother with sister, and male with male, and each man neighing after the wife of his neighbor" (389-94).

Occasionally, ἀσέλγεια is spliced into quotes from sin lists where it does not belong in the original text, such as Origen does with Col 3,5 in *Contra Celsum* 5.49.26, and Basil does with Eph 5,3 in *Ennaratio in prophetam Esaiam* 14.283.3. Curiously, out of the few allusions to Mark 7,21-2 by patristic writers, Epiphanius (*Haer.* 2.359.13) is the only writer who includes the word ἀσέλγεια, quoting it along with only the sins of πορνεία, μοιχεία, καὶ τὰ τούτοις ὅμοια as a trio of sexual vices like Boswell's.

Basil answers the question, "What is ἀσέλγεια?" by describing it as "an attitude of the soul that neither possesses nor can endure the pain of discipline (ἀθλητικόν)" (*Regulae Brevius Tractae*, Q. 67). He defines ἀσέλγεια as a "readiness to indulge in any pleasure."

It may be observed that no Jewish or early Christian writer before 200 AD ever uses both ἀσέλγεια, and any overt term for homosexual behavior, in the same document. Paul uses ἀρσενοκοίτης in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy, but does not use ἀσέλγεια in those letters. He uses ἀσέλγεια in Romans, 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians, but not ἀρσενοκοίτης or παιδεραστία (although Romans 1 does refer to the behavior in question). The same is true in 1 and 2 Peter and Jude: 2 Peter refers to Sodom and

<sup>11</sup> J. Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago - London 1980) 103, n.42.

Gomorrah, but only speaks of ἀσέλγεια, not of ἀρσενοκοίτης. The *Didache* uses παιδοφθορέω (2,2), but never ἀσέλγεια. *Hermas* uses ἀσέλγεια (although possibly to mean “lawlessness”, not specifically sexual), but *Hermas* never refers explicitly to homosexual behavior.

Clement of Alexandria is the first post-apostolic writer to juxtapose ἀσέλγεια with μοιχεία and παιδεραστία (*Stromata* 2.7.34.2.2; 3.4.36.4.2). The first passage resembles the elements of Boswell’s “triple prohibition”. In the latter passage, Clement makes it clear that μοιχεία and παιδεραστία are the first behaviors that come to mind when he speaks of ἀσέλγεια.

Note that the word ἀσέλγεια appears on Jesus’ lips only in a Gospel written apparently for the church at Rome. The word appears in the only “sin list” attributed to Jesus, recorded both by Matthew (15,16-20) and by Mark (7,18-23). The context is a dispute about where Jesus stands on observance of the Jewish law (specifically in the area of handwashing). Has Jesus come to abrogate the Law? Is he an antinomian, a promoter of moral laxity? Or is there a law for his followers to obey? Is it the Jewish law in its entirety that Jesus’ followers must obey? Or if not, then exactly what moral principles does Jesus teach?<sup>12</sup>

Jesus explains to his disciples why food and ritual cleanliness are not true sources of defilement, because the items in question do not enter the heart, but the stomach, and are then expelled. Jesus then proceeds to identify a collection of sins that do defile the human heart<sup>13</sup>. Both Matthew and Mark include both πορνεία and μοιχεία on their lists. Only Mark has ἀσέλγεια on his list also. It would appear that the writer of Mark, writing for a general audience, saw a need to spell out an element of Jesus’ teaching that addressed a sexual lifestyle issue among Gentiles, a matter that was less of an issue for Matthew’s predominantly Jewish audience. Furthermore, for some reason, neither πορνεία nor μοιχεία specifically addressed the sexual sin he had in mind. It is likely (particularly in light of a text such as Melito, *De Pasc.* 389-94) that Jesus was speaking of violations of the Torah such as homosexual behavior, incest, or bestiality, rather than comparatively less shocking sins such as adultery and fornication.

The theory articulated here does not depend on any one approach to literary dependence in the Gospels. One must ask either why Matthew

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion in C. E. Carleton, “The Things That Defile (Mark VII.14) and the Law in Matthew and Mark”, *NTS* 15 (1968-9) 75-96.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus’ sin list parallels a sin list in IQS 4 9-11: “But to the spirit of perversity belong greed, remissness in right doing, wickedness and falsehood, pride and presumption, ruthless deception and guile, abundant insolence, shortness of temper and profusion of folly, arrogant passion, *abominable acts in a spirit of lewdness* (מעשי תועבה ברוח זנות), *filthy ways in the thralldom of unchastity* (דרכי נדה בעבודת טמאה), a blasphemous tongue, blindness of eyes, dullness of ears, stiffness of neck and hardness of heart”. (Emphasis added.)

deletes ἀσέλγεια from his material, or why Mark adds it. Assuming that Matthew deletes it, does he do so because it was superfluous, or because it had shock value which was unnecessary in his context? Neither does this theory require a belief in the authenticity of 2 Peter, although it would enhance the theory even more if Peter, the suggested voice behind Mark, were also the voice behind this letter that uses ἀσέλγεια more than any other NT text.

What Aramaic word could Jesus have used, that Mark would have translated into Greek as ἀσέλγεια? Our best guess could be made by consulting the Syriac version. The Syriac version of Mark 7,22 uses the noun *tzachnutah*, meaning “harlotry, licentiousness, immodesty, or lewdness” (also translated by the Latin *impudicitia*, a word with strong homosexual overtones)<sup>14</sup>. *Tzachnutah* is used in the Syriac NT only here, and in Gal 5,19 and 1 Pet 4,3 (in all three cases, it translates ἀσέλγεια). Aramaic has a rare cognate noun ܛܚܢܘܬܐ, meaning “stinking fluid” (used in the Targum to Ezek 23,20). The root ܛܢܘ even occurs as a *hapax legomenon* in the Hebrew Bible in Joel 2,20, where the noun form refers to the “stench” of rotting locusts. It is possible that the precise word Jesus used is no longer extant or was never used in print, and that the Syriac term (which closely resembles the meaning of ἀσέλγεια), if it is not the precise term that Jesus used, comes the closest to capturing what he said.

Both the Old Latin (a aur b c d f ff<sup>2</sup> i n q r) and the Vulgate translate ἀσέλγεια in Mark 7,22 with the term *impudicitia*, which they also use for ἀσέλγεια in 2 Cor 12,21, Gal 5,19, and Eph 4,19. The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* says that *impudicitia* is “often used of homosexual vice”, and that the related adjective *impudicus* also refers to “flouting the accepted social code...of men, often as sub., w. spec. ref. to homosexuality”<sup>15</sup>.

Williams claims that, unless one wished to bluntly call a man a *cinaedus*, the best way to euphemistically indicate that a man had been penetrated, or desired to be, was by the term *impudicus*<sup>16</sup>. Williams writes that while *impudicitia*

“...can insinuate a general lewdness or indecency with no specific reference to the receptive role...most often an accusation of *impudicitia* leveled against a man has an even nastier thrust and a more precise effect, namely to signify that he has been penetrated.

<sup>14</sup> R. Smith, *A Compendious Syriac-English Dictionary* (Oxford 1910) 477. In C. Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum* (Halle 1928) 626, *tzachnutah* is translated by the Latin word *impudicitia*. The writer of this article would like to thank Dr. Timothy Saleska of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis for his help on the Syriac term used here.

<sup>15</sup> P. G. W. Glare, ed., *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford 1968-82) 853.

<sup>16</sup> C. A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (New York - Oxford 1999) 172-3.

In this sense *pudicitia* represents no vague notion of chastity or purity but rather the specific ideal of masculine bodily integrity understood as impenetrability. In other words, a claim that a man was *impudicus* usually functioned as a coded way of signifying that his masculine inviolability had been compromised, and ancient discussions of a man's *pudicitia* can almost always be reduced to this question: Has he been penetrated or not?<sup>17</sup>

Seneca (*Ep.* 99.13) condemns “men who cater to the passions of themselves and others in mutual lust (*mutuo impudici*)”. Suetonius, writing about Julius Caesar (*Jul.* 52.3), says, “Lest there be any doubt in anyone's mind that he was notorious indeed both for his *impudicitia* and his adulteries, the elder Curio called him in one of his speeches ‘every woman's man and every man's woman’”. It is this sense of *impudicitia* that is arguably the meaning behind Mark's use of ἀσέλγεια in transmitting the words of Jesus in Mark 7,22.

In its other six NT occurrences, ἀσέλγεια is translated as *luxuria*. *OLD*'s second meaning of *luxuria* seems to fit here: “Unruly or willful behavior (of persons or animals). b. disregard for moral restraints, licentiousness”. The Roman comic poet Martial uses it this way: “(N)othing is more chaste than you of all men; but no page of mine is without wantonness (*luxuria*)” (*Ep.* 3.69.4). *Luxuria* is used similarly by Tertullian in connection with *adulteria*, *stupra*, and *incestum* (*Ad Nat.* 1.16.7-12).

What could Jesus have meant by the use of this root? The Syriac translation confirms that there was a Semitic equivalent to the translated term Mark uses. The Syriac term narrows the options on the meaning of ἀσέλγεια, and confirms that some form of sexual immorality was on Jesus' mind. The Aramaic cognate of the Syriac term (if Jesus employed a word from this root) suggests that the sin in question was a sin that was a particular stench or source of revulsion. The Old Latin translation strengthens the sense that ἀσέλγεια is used here to refer to homosexual and/or other shocking behavior of a sexual nature. Perhaps further research may connect the original term used by Jesus with specific sins in the intertestamental rabbinic writings.

Exactly what did Jesus consider to be “utter shamelessness”? What did he consider too far “over the line”? The danger is to impose twenty-first century AD politically correct ideas on Jesus. It is unlikely that Jesus used the word to describe the scandals of poverty and injustice. It is unlikely that he was speaking of mere affronts to “common decency” (whatever that means). In context, it is far more likely that Jesus had in mind what his fellow Jews (like the author of 2 Peter) meant when they

<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality* 173.

used the word: images of Sodom and Gomorrah, images of outrageous violation of the one-flesh union of man and woman. Jesus would likely have shared Jude's concern about those who "twist the grace of God into ἀσέλγεια" (Jude 4)<sup>18</sup>.

If Jesus had wished to speak of homosexual behavior in his list of sins that defile the human heart, to what other word could Mark have turned in his translation? Παιδεραστία was too narrow a term. Ἀρσενοκοίτης had barely been coined by Paul. And πορνεία is too broad a concept, although it is the only word Matthew chooses to use in his version of Jesus' sin list. Ἀσέλγεια was an ideal word for identifying both homosexual behavior and other similar sexual sins of which even the Mishnah was reticent to speak any more than was absolutely necessary. It appears that the situation demanded that the subject be addressed for Mark's mixed audience of Jews and Gentiles, but not for Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience.

Ἀσέλγεια reveals itself as a shamelessness that knows no boundaries, a shocking, brazen disregard for any kind of morality. Did Jesus use this word as a synonym for homoerotic activity and other similar acts from which Jews (along with many Gentiles) recoiled in horror? One cannot prove beyond doubt that Jesus had this meaning in mind, but a plausible case can be made that he did.

The appearance of ἀσέλγεια on the lips of Mark's Jesus must be accounted for somehow, and it will not do to say that a word of such shock value as ἀσέλγεια was a throw-away detail, or was intended as nothing more than a synonym for πορνεία or μοιχεία. Yes, these three words may overlap in meaning, but in a context where all three are used together as part of a standard trio of sexual vices, and particularly in a first century AD Jewish context, where ἀσέλγεια is virtually always used in a sexual sense, it is likely that all three terms are intended to convey specific meanings: fornication, adultery, and the most shocking sexual offenses named in the Torah. It is argued here that, as he seeks to faithfully communicate Jesus' teaching, Mark found it necessary to emphasize to his readers that Jesus did explicitly reaffirm the Torah's prohibition of the most shocking sexual offenses, a reaffirmation that Matthew did not find it necessary to make to his readers.

<sup>18</sup> J. P. Meier (*A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [New York 2001] III, 502-3) writes, "On *sexual* matters, Jesus and the Essenes tend in the same direction: stringent standards and prohibitions...In a sense, one could call both Jesus and the Essenes extreme conservatives...apart from the two special cases of divorce and celibacy, where he diverged from mainstream Judaism, his views *were* those of mainstream Judaism. Hence there was no pressing need for him to issue or for the earliest Christian Jews to enshrine moral pronouncements about matters on which all Law-abiding Jews agreed. If almost all Jews agreed that acts of fornication and adultery were wrong, there was no reason for Jesus, who shared these views (see, e.g., Mark 7:21-22; Luke 16:18) to exegete the obvious".

Jesus says that both πορνεία and ἀσέλγεια come from the heart, along with murder, theft, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness (Mark 7,21-3). As the debate about sexuality continues in today's society, Jesus' word about shameless disregard for boundaries in the area of sexual behavior deserves further consideration in this debate.

G. Thomas HOBSON  
Department of Biblical Exegesis  
Concordia Seminary  
801 Seminary Place  
St. Louis, MO 63105 (USA)