THE BETROTHAL VIEW AND THE MEANING OF 

ΠΟΡΝΕΙΑ IN MATTHEW 5:32 AND 19:9

by

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The American Evangelical church of the 21st Century is facing a significant crisis. Not only must pastors engage a culture which is riding the waves of social and political turmoil, but these same pastors are finding more and more that the members of their congregation are struggling with some of the same issues as their non-believing neighbors. Foremost among these issues is the alarming increase in divorces in America, even among Evangelical Christians. A 2008 survey found that 26% of self-professing Evangelical Christians had been divorced (compared to 32% of all believers and 33% of unbelievers).\(^1\) In light of such startling truths, pastors need to be more equipped than ever to provide their congregation with a biblical view of marriage and divorce.

Further complicating the issue of equipping the church with a biblical view of marriage and divorce is the lack of consensus on what constitutes legitimate grounds for a divorce. It seems that the overwhelming evidence of Scripture points to marriage as an indissoluble, lifelong union as first evidenced by the creation account. Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”\(^2\) That this passage hints at a lifelong union is made clear by Jesus’ response to the Pharisees when they ask Jesus about the circumstances that would permit divorce. After quoting Genesis 2:24, Jesus adds, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9). Moreover, Jesus continues in Mark and Luke’s gospel, saying, “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another


\(^2\) All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).
commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery” (Luke 16:18; compare Mark 10:11-12). Paul likewise summarizes Jesus’ teaching by saying that the “wife should not separate from her husband” and the “husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Corinthians 7:12). The overwhelming witness of Scripture, then, seems to leave little ground for divorce and remarriage.\(^3\)

Why then the widespread disagreement on this issue? The numerous views about the legitimate grounds for divorce and subsequent remarriage can nearly all be traced to one’s interpretation of two passages in Matthew’s gospel where the “exception clauses” occur. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus says, “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery” (Mt. 5:32) and “whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Mt. 19:9). More specifically, with very few exceptions, the issue comes down to the meaning of the Greek term πορνεία. While the term πορνεία has a broad semantic range, David Jones rightly points out that the context must determine the meaning, and all views inevitably limit the meaning of the term in some way. Consequently, the question is not if the term is narrowed in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, but how it is meant to be limited.\(^4\) This paper will focus on how the betrothal view understands the term πορνεία as infidelity during the betrothal period and will attempt to assess the validity of this conclusion. In order to assess the conclusions of the betrothal

\(^3\) John Piper gives a brief, yet thorough overview of the pertinent texts and concludes that remarriage is always forbidden after divorce, for God still recognizes the union of the initial marriage. See John Piper, “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper,” Available at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/resources/divorce-remarriage-a-position-paper>.

position, a brief summary of the betrothal position will be provided. The next section will look at the use of πορνεία in the Septuagint (LXX), followed by the use of πορνεία in the New Testament. After looking at the semantic range of πορνεία in the biblical accounts, this paper will look at the “exception clauses” of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 to determine if the betrothal view provides a plausible explanation.

**Betrothal View**

The betrothal view of divorce and remarriage, while not widely held, seems to have gained favor in recent years, perhaps aided by the support of notable Evangelical scholars such as John Piper and James Montgomery Boice. The betrothal view “holds that with the exception clause Jesus was referring to the unique Jewish practice that allowed for a marriage to be annulled if evidence of infidelity was manifest during the betrothal period.”

Those who hold this position note that there is no modern parallel to this ancient Jewish practice; moreover, they argue that the rest of the biblical evidence points to marriage as an indissoluble, lifelong union. Consequently, the clear implication of this position is that one is prohibited from actively seeking a divorce.

One of the primary arguments in favor of the betrothal position is the Jewish context of Matthew. They argue that the inclusion of the “exception clauses” is pertinent to Matthew’s Jewish audience, but would not have been to Mark and Luke’s predominantly Gentile audience, hence the omission. Further evidence of the context of betrothal is the inclusion in the narrative of Joseph’s intent to divorce Mary quietly

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5 Ibid., 69.

6 Ibid., 77.
during their betrothal period (Mt. 1:19). Moreover, they present evidence that πορνεία refers to betrothal unfaithfulness in Deuteronomy 22:21 and John 8:41. In light of this evidence, proponents of the betrothal view think the best rendering of the term πορνεία is infidelity during the betrothal period.

**The Use of πορνεία in the LXX**

The word πορνεία is used in the LXX 43 times, as is its cognate term ἐκπορνεύω, providing a total of 86 examples in the LXX that could inform the meaning of πορνεία in the exception clauses. At least 27 of the occurrences of πορνεία (63%) and 35 of the occurrences of ἐκπορνεύω (81%) are used metaphorically to speak of Israel’s tendency to forsake the Lord and play the harlot with other gods. As Israel is often characterized as God’s wife, the imagery implies adultery, though its use as a metaphor means one should not then equate this usage of πορνεία as identical to adultery. The term is also used on numerous occasions to speak of fornication (non-married sexual intercourse). For example, Tamar in Genesis 38:24 is said to be pregnant by immorality (i.e. fornication, prostitution). Likewise, Jehu uses πορνεία in 2 Kings 9:22 to refer to Jezebel’s frequent fornication. Another usage in Numbers 14:33 seems to carry more the notion of unfaithfulness to God, relating closely to the spiritual metaphor idea. In all but one case (Dt. 22:21), the other uses of ἐκπορνεύω not relating to spiritual adultery refer to prostitution. The exception in Deuteronomy 22:21, already alluded to above, speaks of a young woman who is found not to be a virgin by her husband when they consummate

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7 Ibid., 78-79.

8 There are at least 27 occasions where πορνεία is best understood as a spiritual metaphor of Israel’s adultery with gods of other nations (Hos 4:11; 5:4; 6:10; Mic 1:7; Nah 3:4; Jer 3:2, 9; 13:27; Ezek 16:15, 22, 25, 33, 34, 36, 41; 23:7, 8, 11, 14, 17, 18, 19, 27, 29, 35; 43:7, 9).
their marriage. The implication is that infidelity had to have occurred either prior to or during the betrothal period.

One additional point important to notice is the lack of any specific references in the LXX to *πορνεία* as adultery, significant since adultery is the most common understanding of *πορνεία* in Matthew’s exception clauses. The only possible use of *πορνεία* as adultery is its use in reference to Hosea’s wife Gomer in Hosea 3:3. However, where Gomer is specifically identified as an adulteress in Hosea 3:1, the LXX renders the word *μοιχαλίν* suggesting a more general meaning of *πορνεία* in Hosea 3:3. Thus, while not conclusive, the use of *πορνεία* in the LXX tends towards metaphorical spiritual adultery or illicit sexual activity by unmarried persons.

**The Use of πορνεία in the New Testament**

The term *πορνεία* is used only 25 times in the New Testament. Similar to the LXX, a large number of these uses are a spiritual metaphor of whoring after other gods.9 Besides the metaphorical uses, it seems the rest of the uses of *πορνεία* ought to be understood as some type of sexual immorality, yet clearly distinct from adultery. There are two primary reasons for this conclusion, one linguistic and one exegetical. First, the term *πορνεία* is used in two places (including one in Matthew) alongside *μοιχεία*, the primary term used for adultery.10 If the LXX has not used *πορνεία* to refer to adultery, and Matthew himself (along with Mark) has distinguished the two, it is unlikely that the exception clauses intend adultery as the primary meaning of *πορνεία*. The second reason

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9 There are seven verses in Revelation that use *πορνεία* as a spiritual metaphor of whoring after other gods (Rev 2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2).

10 Mt 15:19; Mk 7:21;
is exegetical and is found in Paul’s treatment on marriage and divorce in 1 Corinthians 7. In verse 2, Paul writes, “But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” Here Paul uses πορνεία to speak of the tendency that many have towards sexual sin. His solution is that those who struggle with the sin of πορνεία ought to marry. If Paul’s solution is that they should marry, then one can imply that those who are committing or who are tempted to commit πορνεία are currently unmarried. Finally, John 8:41 presents an interesting case. Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees about his Heavenly Father, when they then appear to turn on him and say, “We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father—-even God.” There appears to be good reason for rejecting the notion of adultery here. First, the narrative that precedes this exchange is about the woman caught in adultery. The word used to describe her sin is once again μοιχεύω, not πορνεία. Were the Pharisees referring back to this event in their comment, one would expect the use of μοιχεύω. Additionally, the conversation has begun to change direction. The debate has moved from adultery to the discussion of whether the Pharisees are the true children of Abraham since they do not do the works of Abraham (v. 39). When they see that they are losing ground in the conversation, they appear to turn on Jesus and try to discredit him on the basis of his father, in that he was thought to have been conceived by πορνεία. If this is indeed what the Pharisees have done, then the context of πορνεία in this verse is Jesus’ own conception while Joseph and Mary were betrothed. The context in this verse suggests infidelity during the betrothal period as a possible understanding of πορνεία.

The previous discussion has outlined all the uses of πορνεία in the New Testament save the “exception clauses.” However, before broaching the subject of the “exception
clauses,” some observations can be made. First, like the LXX, the New Testament uses \( \text{πορνεία} \) in several cases as a spiritual metaphor of whoring after other gods. Second, in those cases that relate to sexual sin, the New Testament seems to distinguish between \( \text{πορνεία} \) (sexual immorality) and \( \text{μοιχεία} \) (adultery). Third, there appear to be no cases in Scripture in which the context suggests the best rendering of \( \text{πορνεία} \) as adultery in the sense of marital unfaithfulness. There are at most two cases (Deuteronomy 22 and John 8) where the term suggests infidelity during the betrothal period. In all other cases where it refers to sexual sin, it seems to have in mind sexual immorality or fornication/prostitution of single individuals.

The “Exception Clauses”

The majority view of the Western Evangelical church on the issue of divorce and remarriage is currently the Erasmian view. This view understands the “exception clauses” to mean that one should not initiate a divorce, except in the case that one spouse commits adultery. Additionally, in those cases where divorce is legitimate, remarriage is allowed. However, this view seems to be in every other passage antithetical to the teaching of Scripture on marriage as an indissoluble union. Moreover, the previous analysis of the biblical use of \( \text{πορνεία} \) suggests that the term is not elsewhere used to mean adultery in a marital relationship. However, if one rejects the prevailing Erasmian interpretation, is the betrothal view a possible replacement? The previous analysis surveyed the use of \( \text{πορνεία} \) in both the LXX and the New Testament and concluded that the majority of uses refer to either spiritual adultery of believers with God or a broad, general category of sexual sins including fornication, prostitution, etc. Nevertheless, there are possible occurrences in Deuteronomy 22 and John 8 where the context allows for the possibility that \( \text{πορνεία} \)
means infidelity during the betrothal period. The question that will now be addressed is whether the context of Matthew's exception clauses allow similarly narrow readings of πορνεία.

In Matthew 5, Jesus is preaching the famous Sermon on the Mount. The exception clause in verse 32 occurs in the third of six formulaic statements that Jesus makes in which he states a common teaching of the day and then qualifies it in an extreme fashion. For example, in 5:21-22, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment..." (emphasis added). Similarly, in 5:27-28 Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Moreover, the three formulaic occurrences after the exception clause deal with oaths, retaliation, and loving one's enemies (5:33-48). In each case, Jesus identifies the teaching of the day and responds with stricter requirements. With this formula in mind, consider Matthew 5:31-32: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality (πορνεία), makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." As many commentators have noted, the Pharisaic teaching of the day was split between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. The school of Hillel allowed divorce for any reason, while the school of Shammai permitted divorce only in the case of adultery. Consequently, to interpret the exception clause here as legitimizing divorce in the case of adultery, and thereby agreeing with the school of Shammai, does not seem to fit the
context of Jesus' formulaic statements that give stricter requirements than the prevailing teaching of the day. However, while the context suggests that Jesus is teaching a stricter requirement as evidenced in the passages immediately preceding and following this verse, there is no clear link that suggests betrothal is in view here. While the betrothal view rightly recognizes the spirit behind Jesus' teaching on divorce, it does not appear as though there is enough textual warrant to limit the meaning of πορνεία in this case to infidelity during the betrothal period.

The context of Matthew 19:9 is quite different. Unlike in chapter 5 where Jesus is preaching a sermon, the exception clause in 19:9 comes in response to a direct challenge/question from the Pharisees in 19:3: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" Jesus' response immediately returns to God's creative intent for marriage, and after quoting Genesis 2:24 to emphasize the one flesh union, Jesus adds, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." Jesus' clear teaching here is against divorce, apparently for any reason. Only after the Pharisees ask why Moses then gave instructions for divorce does Jesus respond that it was because of their hardness of heart the Moses allowed divorce, but this was not God's original intent (Mt. 19:8). Then Jesus adds, "And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." Once again, repeated reference to God's intention that marriages are a lifelong union argues against any interpretation that sees Jesus conceding ground back to the Pharisees. Nevertheless, as in 5:32, there is no explicit (or even implicit) reference to the betrothal period. There is no shift in discussion that would seem to allow for such a transition either. Consequently, while the betrothal view again
maintains the correct spirit of Jesus' high view of marriage, there is no contextual evidence that warrants such a limiting of the word \( \pi \rho \nu \epsilon \iota \alpha \).

While this discussion is by no means exhaustive, a brief overview of the context of Matthew's exception clauses does not seem to provide adequate warrant for limiting the term \( \pi \rho \nu \epsilon \iota \alpha \) to infidelity during the betrothal period. As David Jones, a proponent of the betrothal view, rightly noted above, the context must determine the meaning.\(^{11}\) While one may remain sympathetic to the spirit of the betrothal view, it seems that it falls short of the necessary warrant to limit the semantic range of \( \pi \rho \nu \epsilon \iota \alpha \), and ultimately is guilty of what D.A. Carson deems an "unwarranted restriction of the semantic field."\(^{12}\)

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to assess the betrothal position on divorce and remarriage in order to determine if it provides a viable interpretation of \( \pi \rho \nu \epsilon \iota \alpha \) and thus an answer to the riddle of Matthew's exception clauses. While an attractive position in that it takes into account the whole of Scripture's teaching on divorce and remarriage better than most views, it nevertheless seems unlikely that the context of Matthew 5 and 19 provide legitimate warrant to accept their understanding of \( \pi \rho \nu \epsilon \iota \alpha \) as infidelity during the betrothal period. While the context of Deuteronomy 22 and John 8 may permit such a limited interpretation, neither is conclusive, and neither Matthew 5 nor Matthew 19 possess level of evidence required to recommend the betrothal view as the best interpretation. Nevertheless, much can be learned from the betrothal view and serious consideration should be given to its conclusions going forward, especially with respect to

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\(^{11}\) David Jones, "The Betrothal View," 84.

the overwhelming emphasis in Scripture on marriage as a lifelong, indissoluble union. While this paper has argued against the betrothal view as the best explanation on the basis of its understanding of πορνεία, it still remains a possibility and one must not too quickly dismiss its conclusions.