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The Greek Word *Porneia* in the Matthean Exception Clauses

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Abstract

Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 present an interesting exegetical discussion concerning the acceptability and permissibility of divorce. These verses provoke interest because of their inclusion of an exception clause seemingly allowing for a permissible divorce. The verses state the unlawfulness of divorce "except in the case of *porneia*." *Porneia* is the word around which this discussion revolves and its meaning differs vastly depending upon the interpreter. The word is interpreted specifically as adultery during the betrothal period and also as sexual promiscuity and immorality on the other. This thesis explains both views and then seeks to offer all relevant evidence by exploring context, background, lexical meaning, tradition, and the various uses of the word in the New Testament and Septuagint.

The Greek Word *Porneia* in the Matthean Exception Clauses

Introduction

Perhaps one of the greatest social dilemmas that is present in today's society, and even in Christian culture, is the matter of the permanency of marriage and the validity of divorce. The "issue of divorce and remarriage [has become] one of the most pressing social concerns of today."[1] In Christian circles, confusion permeates the subject of biblical divorce. Opinions vary, ideas are presented, and disagreements are many. Some find this issue to be unimportant while others see it as an essential doctrine or ethical belief which has great consequences. It is a question that every Christian will ask at some point in his or her life: "Is divorce ever permitted?" Quite often, a Christian will go to the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Gospels to come to terms with their concern and they find apparent contradiction and uncertainty. What is the reason for this confusion? It can be summed up in three words: the "Matthean Exception Clauses." Were a believer not to have the Gospel according to Matthew and have only read from Mark 10 and Luke 16, he or she could confidently say that it is the teaching of Christ that all divorce is direct disobedience to God and "therefore, what God has joined together let no man separate." Confusion arises when one opens up the Gospel of Matthew to either chapter 5 or 19 and sees that the Gospel writer, after declaring God's intended permanency of marriage, provides for a divorce for the reason of "fornication." What does this mean?

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[1]David W. Jones. "The betrothal view of divorce and remarriage." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 165, no. 657 (January 2008): 68.

If one is to read Matt 5:32 or 19:9 in different versions of the Scripture, he would often find different translations of the word. The King James Version is specific and says "adultery," while the Contemporary English Version reads "some terrible sexual sin!" All other translations lie somewhere in between. Whether it is "unchastity" in the New American Standard Bible or "sexual immorality" in the New Living Translation, English Standard Version, and the New King James Version, no matter which translation is used the meaning of the passage is still vague and ill-defined. So what is the problem? Why is this translation so complicated? That is the lexical problem that will be explored in this study. First, this paper will lay out the two primary interpretations of the Matthean clauses. It will then analyze the Greek word "*porneia,*" exploring its roots, synonyms and lexical meanings in the views of modern scholarship. Following this word study, a look at the Old Testament's influences on the discussion will be offered followed by the uses of the Greek word throughout the entire New Testament. The context of the passages, Matthew 5 and 19, will then be discussed along with some possible meanings of both the exception clauses and the actual word *porneia* in this context. The paper will then analyze some relevant syntactical issues in the two Matthean clauses. In closing, the evidences will be summarized and the author's conclusion concerning the meaning of the Greek word "*porneia"* in the Matthean exception clauses will be given.

Before beginning this discussion a few presuppositions must be stated. This paper will approach these issues from the perspective that the Word of God is the source of all truth. As it is written, "all Scripture is given by inspiration of

God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The original words of Scripture are inerrant and infallible. In approaching the biblical text in this paper, ideas or views questioning the validity or accuracy of the words given in Scripture will not be entertained. The Koine Greek in which the New Testament was written has been accurately preserved and communicates the truth of God with absolute precision. It is with this mindset that one can confidently approach the words of Scripture knowing that God promises to give wisdom generously to all who ask in faith (James 1:5-6).

The Alternative Views

It is important to do an overview of the different views which cause the debate over the meaning of the Matthean exception clauses. The popular view held by most contemporary evangelical scholars is described quite often as "the majority view (also known as the Erasmian or Protestant view) interprets *porneia* as a reference to adultery."[2] Basically, the view sees the word applying to any sexual immorality with anyone outside of a person's spouse. Spurgeon assumes that the word is synonymous with "infidelity to the marriage vow," mainly adultery. He states that one "who commits adultery does by that act and deed in effect sunder the marriage bond, and it ought then to be formally recognized by the state as being sundered."[3] Janzen would describe this view by defining

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[2] Jones, "Betrothal," 73.

[3]Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The King Has Come* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1987), 59.

porneia as "intercourse with someone other than her husband on the part of the woman during betrothal or marriage."[4] Jones agrees saying that the exception for marriage includes "nothing but adultery,"[5] Vernon Mcgee would concur wholeheartedly saying that "unfaithfulness" or "immorality" is the only grounds for a biblical divorce.[6]

Yet many hold to a specific betrothal view of the passages. Proponents of this view take a holistic view of the use of *porneia* throughout the Gospel of Matthew. As David Jones says: "it is not just the proximate context of the exception clause that gives the word *porneia* its meaning, but rather the milieu of the entire Book of Matthew."[7] This is the critical aspect of the betrothal view which must be understood. Those who hold this view are simply trying to understand the meaning of the word based upon its usage in the book of Matthew. They believe, as Guenther points out, that "In both our Matthean texts, the scope of *porneia* must be narrower than that of *moicheia* (adultery)."[8] David Jones sums up the betrothal view:

> betrothal view advocates point out that nearly every Christian view of divorce and remarriage limits the meaning of *porneia* in some

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[4]David Janzen, "The meaning of *porneia* in Matthew 5.32 and 19.9: an approach from the study of ancient Near Eastern culture," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* (December 2000): 67.

[5]David Clyde Jones. "The Westminster Confession on divorce and remarriage." *Presbyterion* 16, no. 1 (Spr 1990): 17.

[6]Jones, "Bethrothal," 76.

[7]Jones, "Betrothal," 76.

[8]Allen R. Guenther. "The exception phrases: except *porneia*, including *porneia* or excluding *porneia*? (Matthew 5:32; 19:9)." *Tyndale Bulletin* 53, no. 1 (2002): 96.

> sense…the question is not whether to limit the meaning of *porneia* but rather how to limit its meaning.[9]

But does the betrothal view limit the meaning of *porneia* to an unnecessary strict sense? Mahoney says that such views of the exception clauses "are so construed as to remove the grounds for a real divorce in Christ's teaching."[10] The majority view seems to suggest that, as Charles C. Ryrie points out, "the weakness [of the betrothal view] lies in the technical meaning given to *porneia*."[11] They would say that this technical meaning is not supported by any context of the Greek word. There are several variations to these two opposing views, but none are held so commonly as to deserve attention. This paper will explain the support for both of these views trying to come to the proper interpretation of the passage and the correct meaning of *porneia* so as to understand the biblical teaching of Christ on divorce.

Scholarly Views on the Word Porneia

Porneia has such a wide variety of meanings and functions based upon context and other criteria that it becomes easy for any exegete to interpret it in such a way that is consistent with his preconceived notions of a passage. The lexicons are consistent in their broadness of defining this word, but there remains a danger in lack of clarity caused by semantics which can strongly influence what

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[9]Jones, "Betrothal," 84.

[10]Aidan Mahoney, "New look at the divorce clauses in Mt 5:32 and 19:9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 1968): 29.

[11]Charles C. Ryrie, "Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Fall 1982): 188.

one means when he defines the word. Joseph Henry Thayer in his lexicon defines *porneia* as "used of adultery, fornication, prostitution."[12] G. W. Lampe similarly describes *porneia* as "fornication,[13] unchastity, and sexual impurity."[14] Other lexicons use additionally: "of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse,"[15] "lewdness, or any sexual sin,"[16] and simply "sexual immorality of any kind."[17] Malina summarizes the definitions calling *porneia* "unlawful sexual conduct or unlawful conduct in general."[18] So, to put it simply, *porneia* covers "a broad range of sexual sins,"[19] from adultery even to the point of alluding to incest.[20] As the reader can see, this word is quite broad in its application to sexual sin. This is reflected in the fact that different scholars translate *porneia* "as 'unchastity', 'fornication' (an unfortunate choice, if only for the reason that hardly any native

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[12]Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972): 532. Additional support can be found in Henry George Liddell, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 662.

[13]Bruce M. Metzger, *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek (*Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 24.

[14]G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 1121.

[15]William F. Arndt, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 693.

[16]Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1992), 1201.

[17]Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 771.

[18]Bruce J. Malina, "Does *porneia* mean fornication," *Novum testamentum* 14, no. 1 (January 1972): 11.

[19]William A. Heth, "Another look at the Erasmian view of divorce and remarriage," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 3 (September 1982): 265.

[20]Janzen, "Porneia," 67.

English speakers employ it in their normal vocabulary), or 'adultery'."[21] In order to avoid an older English language gap and a debate concerning semantics, some definitions will be provided to create a basis from which terms can be discussed. Several English words which will be mentioned frequently will be defined from *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* as they will be used in this thesis:

- "Chaste" – "Not having indulged in premarital or extramarital sexual intercourse."
- "Unchastity" – "Not chaste."
- "Sexual immorality" – "Not conforming to accepted patterns of what is considered right and wrong [sexual] behavior in a culture." (Thus, this would be any Scriptural sexual sin).
- "Fornication" – "Sexual intercourse, between two persons not married to each other, i.e. adultery."
- "Adultery" – "The unfaithfulness of a married person to the marriage bed; sexual intercourse by a married man with another than his wife, or voluntary sexual intercourse by a married woman with another than her husband."[22]

Confusion concerning semantics will hopefully be lessened now that some foundational definitions have been established. *Porneia*, though rare in classical

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[21]Janzen, "Porneia," 67.

[22]*New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, (New York: Decair, 1981), *See Stated Entries*.

Greek, is found quite often in both the New Testament and also in the Septuagint (LXX). The meaning of this word is essential to the understanding of the exception clauses which will be seen to be essential to the understanding of what God teaches from His word about the issue of divorce. The verb form of *porneia* is *pornueō* and it means "to prostitute or practice prostitution or sexual immorality. [It is to be] distinguished from *moicheueō,*"[23] meaning "to commit adultery." An alternate translation involves an incestuous relationship, as Janzen says: "A number of scholars have defined *porneia* [as] an 'incestuous marriage.'"[24]

In conclusion to the scholarly understanding of the word *porneia*, it is important to realize that it is broadly used and understood to mean:

> the general term for all illicit or immoral sexual intercourse. The specific form may sometimes be indicated by the context. If payment of wages is involved, it is prostitution. If it involves close relatives, it is incest. If it involves persons of the same sex, it is homosexuality. It if involves an unmarried couple, it is unchastity. If it involves a married person outside of marriage, it is adultery.[25]

Jesus' use of the word *porneia* may be somewhat specific in the Matthean contexts, but the word's nature itself does not indicate any precise meaning. It definitely applies to some kind of "sexual unfaithfulness,"[26] but to establish what this may be definitively requires several other influences and characteristics of the word to be explored. *Porneia's* meaning will depend crucially on the specific

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[23]Arndt, *Lexicon*, 693.

[24]Janzen, "Porneia," 69.

[25]Jones, "Westminster," 31.

[26]Arndt, *Lexicon,* 693.

Matthean contexts, which will be explored after some broader contexts. All that can be firmly stated at this point is to say that *porneia* is a serious sexual sin which seems to make divorce permissible through the dissolving of the marriage bond. Both the betrothal view and the majority view fall into the broader lexical definition of the word but the context, as will be seen, will determine the actual usage in Matthew 5 and 19.

Old Testament Use of Porneia

The Old Testament and specifically the Septuagint's (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament known as the LXX) thirty-seven uses of *porneia* should be scrutinized. Jensen says that "it is worth noting that the LXX, which exercised so much influence on the early Christian Church, gives evidence that *porneia* in the LXX could be used in a very general sense."[27] Looking at the Old Testament's translation of the word *porneia*, one finds that it is translated in a variety of ways and very broadly, whether it be as "incest" as in Leviticus 18 or anything from "adultery" to general "sexual immorality."[28] In the book of Hosea the word is used seven times (1:2; 2:6; 4:11,12; 5:4; 6:10) describing the adultery which Hosea's wife, Gomer, committed against him. Ezekiel speaks many times of the "immorality," referring to the sin prevalent in the nation of Israel. Viewing the Old Testament's usage of the word provides a good background for how an early 1st century Jew would have viewed or understood the Greek word *porneia.*

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[27]Joseph Jensen, "Does *porneia* mean fornication: a critique of Bruce Malina," *Novum testamentum* 20, no. 3 (July 1978): 172.

[28]Craig L. Blomberg, "Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: an Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *Trinity Journal* 11, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 176.

The LXX use of *porneia* is both broad and non-specific describing various acts of sexual immorality in different contexts; it nowhere appears to describe a specific adultery or immorality committed only during the betrothal period.

Contextual Meaning in Primary New Testament passages

A comprehensive view of how the New Testament uses the word *porneia* is of first importance. Those scholars who hold to different schools of thought concerning the meaning of *porneia* look for various uses of the word throughout the New Testament so as to confirm their notions. For instance, David Jones acknowledges the importance of exploring the New Testament uses of the word from a betrothal view interpretation of the passage by saying that in order to prove his view one must "show that *porneia* is used in Scripture, aside from the exception clause, to denote betrothal unfaithfulness."[29] There is one New Testament passage which does just this. John 8:41 gives *porneia* the very specific meaning of adultery during the betrothal period. The verse presents the Pharisees directly implying that Jesus was born of fornication (*porneia*), obviously alluding to Mary's alleged unfaithfulness during the betrothal period. But is this verse consistent with the rest of the New Testament's usage of the word? Not hardly. For instance, John, the same writer, uses *porneia* seven times in Revelation to refer to a broad kind of sexual immorality in a figurative sense (see Revelation 2:21; 9:21; 14:7; 17:2,4; 18:3; 19:2). John does not normally see *porneia*'s use as so specific. Dobson shows that the word is used in the New Testament for such sins as "adultery, homosexuality, incest, perversion, prostitution." He points out

[29]Jones, *Betrothal*, 80.

that *porneia* is a noun connected to the verb *porneuo* which means "to prostitute one's body or to give oneself to unlawful sexual intercourse."[30] These diverse translations are far from the specificity which some scholars, like Jones, desire or see necessary to prove a specific meaning of *porneia* in the Matthean exception clauses.

A search through all of the other uses of *porneia* in the NT confirms the reality of *porneia*'s usual imprecise meaning. It is used broadly for all kinds of sexual immorality (Acts 21:25; 1 Corinthians 6:13, 18; 7:2; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:23; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3), specifically for incest (1 Cor. 5:1),[31] in reference to temple prostitution or Gentile immorality (Acts 15:20-29),[32] and as an immorality not synonymous with "adultery" (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21).[33] In 1 Cor. 7:2-9, a central passage concerning the topic of lawful divorce, Paul teaches that marriage should be a solution to the prevalence of immorality (*porneia*). Jensen explains "that marriage and *porneia* are here posed as alternatives (licit and illicit), with no acceptable middle ground, which would not be the case if fornication were not included in *porneia.*"[34] Therefore, it seems reasonable to say that in the greater context of the New Testament, *porneia* is

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[30]Edward G. Dobson, *What the Bible really says about Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage,* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1986), 65.

[31]David Clyde Jones, "The Westminster Confession on divorce and remarriage," *Presbyterion* 16, no. 1 (Spr 1990): 31.

[32]Janzen, "Porneia," 69.

[33]On Page 180 of "Does *porneia* mean fornication: a critique of Bruce Malina." Joseph Jensen presents a very helpful and beneficial distribution of the various *porneia/ porneuein/ porne/ pornos* texts including their usages throughout the New Testament.

[34]Jensen, "Porneia," 182.

usually used for a variety of sexual immoralities rather than a specific adultery during the betrothal period, yet one must still consider Matthew's unique context before applying the same sense to the exception clauses because it could yet refer to the betrothal period.

Absence of Exception Clauses in Alternate Gospel Accounts

One matter which affects the meaning of *porneia* and complicates the discussion is the other Gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching on divorce. The absence of the exception clauses as seen here causes great discussion concerning the validity of the Matthean account:

> Luke 16:18 – "Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."
>
> Mark 10:11-12 - And He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery."

As one can see, this creates a very interesting dilemma for those who depend strongly on the Matthean passages to accept *porneia* as the one exception for divorce. It is a problem because "both Mark 10:11-12 and Luke 16:18 give the impression that under no circumstances would divorce or remarriage be possible."[35] Aidan Mahoney states correctly that this is the "central exegetical difficulty" of understanding Jesus' teaching on divorce.[36] He sums up the paradox well by saying that "on one hand, the absolute indissolubility of both legitimate and sacramental marriage under all circumstances is taken to be asserted in Mk

[35]Heth, "Divorce," 15.

[36]Mahoney, "Clauses," 29.

10:11-12 and Lk 16:18. On the other hand, grounds for real divorce are affirmed in the Matthean clauses."[37]

The apparent contradiction can be dealt with in several ways. Questions arise concerning the purpose of the exception clause if both Mark and Luke seem to teach a total prohibition of divorce. Herron observes that "Mark was meticulously accurate in his presentation of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees and his teachings on the (un)lawfulness of divorce."[38] Others, like Stein, share Herron's doubt in the validity of Jesus actually stating the exception phrase in Matthew's account.[39] But simply because a passage or part of a verse is difficult does not mean that one should question its authenticity. In fact, often the opposite is true. David Alan Black sates that in textual criticism it is recommended to the critic that he "prefer the less harmonious reading in parallel passages."[40] In addition to this, the United Bible Society places complete trust and textual validity in the two clauses, not finding any significant textual variance.[41] So the validity of the phrases should not be thought of in question, rather they should be explained. Blomberg does just this, saying that "the lack of a parallel to the reciprocal statement in Mark 10:12 should probably be explained…as due to

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[37]*Ibid.*

[38]Robert W. Herron, "Mark's Jesus on Divorce : Mark 10:1-12 reconsidered," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 3 (September 1982): 279.

[39]Robert H. Stein, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22, no. 2 (June 1979): 118.

[40]David Alan Black, *New Testament Textual Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 36.

[41]*The Greek New Testament,* 4th rev. ed. Edited by Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce Metzger (London: United Bible Societies, 1993), 71.

Matthew's more Jewish orientation vis-à-vis Mark's more Gentile orientation."[42] Bruce Vawter sums up the significance expertly:

> Marks summary for the Pharisees' question in 10:2 must be no less than adaption; it serves admirably well to introduce a didactic passage intended for gentiles…Bound up with this is the adaption apparent in 10-11, where the *porneia*-clause, whose sense would be lost upon a gentile audience, and indeed, irrelevant to their needs, has been omitted. In Mark's gospel we have the spirit of Christ's teaching, spelled out for [the] Church.[43]

As Vawter explains, one should seek to understand the different cultural and stylistic influences that affected the different author's inclusion of the text. Matthew included the exception clause in Jesus' teaching by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit because he found it important to include this precise detail in light of his very Jewish audience.

Contextual Study of the Matthean Texts

In exploring the overall Matthean context the student must remember that context is the key to all proper biblical interpretation. As Jones confirms, "*porneia*, the pivotal word in the exception clause, is a general term for sexual sin, its exact meaning must be informed by the context."[44] There are several kinds of context. There is immediate context which includes the words and phrases within the same verse or sentence. After that, the context progressively grows from the paragraph to the chapter to the book to the testament until a student is looking at a word in the entire context of Scripture. The latter is the ultimate goal

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[42]Blomberg, "Marriage," 173.

[43]Vawter, Bruce, "Divorce clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (April 1954): 167.

[44]Jones, *Betrothal*, 76.

of this thesis. The more immediate and Matthean context is what will be dealt with at this point.

In the direct context of Matthew 5 and 19, the reader sees first of all that Jesus is speaking. Blomberg points out that "the Pharisees asked Jesus to respond to a debate concerning *adultery*."[45] The Pharisees were having an internal religious debate based upon the teachings of Jewish teachers and their application of the Old Testament teaching on divorce. There were two primary schools of thought: the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel. As is commonly understood, the school of Hillel boasted a more lenient view that allowed divorce for almost any reason at all. The school of Shammai found it only permissible to divorce in the case of adultery. In actuality, though, both of the schools taught that divorce was *required* upon the breaking of the marriage bond through adultery.[46] This debate was fierce between the two factions of Jewish teachers and they knew that if they could force Jesus into agreeing with either side it would instill more opposition towards him, for as the Matthew 19 account states, they "came to Jesus, testing Him."

In Matthew's chronology, Jesus, during his well-known Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), gives his teaching concerning divorce and remarriage. It is likely that in Matthew 19 the Pharisees have already been informed of what Jesus taught in his sermon and wanted to "test" him based upon that, hoping to find him

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[45] Blomberg, "Marriage," 176 (emphasis added).

[46]David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 133-166. Instone-Brewer provides a masterful discussion of the background to two Matthean texts. He describes in depth from the Mishnah the common beliefs and teachings coming from both Hillel and Shammai Rabbis.

in contradiction with Scripture. This is supported again when, after Jesus gives his answer, they try to force him into contradiction with Deuteronomy 24. Jesus addresses the passage on a deeper level than the teachers understood, delving into the *purpose* of the allowance as being because of the hardness of their hearts. He then calls his disciples to this new level of understanding of marriage as being "never separated." The Pharisees and disciples strongly reacted to Jesus' teaching on divorce, so it seems logical that they understood what the exception clause was referring to and the implications of Jesus' entire teaching. Regardless, there still remains much debate about what Jesus was actually saying and specifically what he meant by excepting *porneia* from the universal principle of the permanency of marriage (Matthew 19:6). Some of these possible contextual interpretations should be scrutinized.

Some say that *porneia* is more specific than basic adultery (see definition on page 11) while others require its meaning to be broader. For example, some scholars hold that *porneia* in this context only refers to adultery during the betrothal period saying, "the scope of *porneia* must be narrower than that of *moicheia* (adultery)."[47] The betrothal view states that *porneia* in Matthew 5 and 19 only refers to adultery during the betrothal period, not during the actual marriage. Others oppose a general "adultery" interpretation because they believe that Jesus was speaking out against a narrow sense of the meaning of adultery, mainly "that of extra-marital sex,"[48] while at the same time prohibiting divorces

[47]Guenther, "Phrases," 96.

[48]Janzen, "Porneia," 79.

for any reason at all. John Gill states that the word is not to be translated in such a way that it is "taken strictly for what is called fornication, but as including adultery, incest, or any unlawful copulation; and is opposed to the sense and practices of the Pharisees."[49]

The context also seems to show that Jesus is not referring to any kind of premarital sexual activity with his exception of *porneia*. Blomberg states this clearly when he explains that the purpose of the Pharisees' question was to cause Jesus to "respond to a debate concerning *adultery* and not premarital sex"[50] (emphasis added). Janzen argues though that divorce, in the minds of the listeners at the time and the readers of the Gospel of Matthew, would have been understood as including separation during the betrothal period. He says that *porneia* was used so that no one would understand this kind of adultery or immorality in a narrow sense but rather "that sex during the betrothal period was included."[51] Perhaps this is one reason for the shock to the hearers to the extent that the disciples say in verse 10 that "it is better not to marry" (Matthew 19:10). But more significant to causing their surprise is that both the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel in that day taught that divorce was *required* for adultery. Jesus was only teaching it to be a provision, a last resort. It would not have caused such surprise in the disciples were he to just be repeating almost verbatim the view of the school of Hillel specifically.

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[49]John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*. Vol. 1 (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, 1976), 48.

[50]Blomberg, "Marriage," 176.

[51]Janzen, "Porneia," 79.

In the larger context of the book of Matthew, the use of *porneia* brings an interesting point to this discussion. In Matthew 15:19, Jesus speaks of the evils that arise from the heart describing them as, "evil thoughts, murders, adulteries (*moicheia*), fornications (*porneia)*, thefts, etc…" (Matthew 15:19, NASB). This dual mentioning of *moicheia* and *porneia* does not prove or suggest that they have absolute different meanings but it does show that they are not synonymous in the mind of Matthew. As David Clyde Jones says, "this does not mean that the specific (*moicheia*) is distinguished from the ground (*porneia*) to the point of exclusion."[52] Jones is saying that *moicheia* can still definitely be included in and be seen as a characteristic of *porneia* in the mind of Matthew as they are both disobedience of the 7th Commandment listed in Exodus 20:14. Matthew 15:19 seems to serve as an example of Matthew's broader use of the term *porneia*, in that it describes more of a general sexual immorality. In Matthew 5 and 19 then, it seems that Matthew is trying to describe any kind of sexual immorality (mainly "sexual intercourse") which violates the marital covenant between the husband and the wife as being an exception to the rule of divorce which he is about to present. The betrothal view at this point seems to be a lexical stretching out of the context of the passage while the Erasmian or majority view seems to hold true to the more immediate context of the passage.

[52]Jones, "Westminster," 32.

Syntactical Elements Seen in Matthew 5 and 19

Interestingly enough, "nearly everything about the two Matthean divorce exception clauses is disputed."[53] Despite the multitude of textual issues concerning the vocabulary, style, tone, and structure of these verses, in this paper the focus will be the unique word, *porneia,* and its use in the exception clauses. Surrounding these two clauses lies much conflict and unsurety and in order to establish the importance of studying the word the local context must be thoroughly explained. Allen goes so far as to say that "nearly every discussion of these texts and of the ethical issues of divorce and remarriage focuses on the phrases *parektos logou porneias* ("except for the reason of fornication" in Mt. 5:32) and *mā epi porneia* ("except for immorality" in Mt. 19:9)."[54] On the one hand, there are scholars such as Bruce Vawter who claim that the *porneia* exception clauses are "redactional insertions on Matthew's part."[55] After twenty-three years of studying the clauses and changing several of his views concerning the passage, he succumbed to a secular forming of the Gospel in that he believes that "it is true, the Matthean *parektos logou porneias* (the exception clause) constitutes a modification of the primitive text."[56]

Not all scholars follow this train of thought though. For example, William A. Heth states that he thinks "a good case can be made that Jesus himself uttered

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[53]Ben Witherington, "Matthew 5:32 and 19:9-Exception or Exceptional Situation?" *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 571.

[54]Guenther, "Phrases," 83.

[55]Bruce Vawter, "Divorce and the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (October 1977): 532.

[56]*Ibid.*, 530.

the exception clause." [57] Aidan Mahoney concurs with Heth stating strongly that "the current text of the exceptive clauses of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is generally conceded to be authentic."[58] In contrast, Instone-Brewer agrees with Vawter in that he finds it likely that the exception clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 are Matthean additions. He, however, does not think that it affects how one should approach the passage because he believes that the Jewish readers would have read the exceptions into the statement regardless.[59] Regardless, Matthew did include these authentic exception clauses, the words of Christ, for a specific reason and purpose. The pursuit of this purpose is the focus of this study.

The question of how the exception clauses relate to the rest of the sentence and also how they fit into the context permeates the discussion of these two passages. Greek scholar Daniel B. Wallace states that Matthew 19:9 is a grammatically "significant passage."[60] It is significant for several reasons, but one reason is the many possible translations of the *mā epi* before *porneia*. Craig L. Blomberg discusses this issue in depth. He explains how some grammarians translate *mā epi* as "even in the case of," or "apart from the consideration of;" he states "that such proposals are now almost universally recognized as extremely unlikely renderings of the Greek. *Mā epi* is a natural ellipsis for *ei/ean mā epi* and

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[57]William A. Heth, "Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 16.

[58]Mahoney, "Clauses," 30.

[59]Instone-Brewer. *Divorce*, 153.

[60]Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics (*Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 376.

should be taken as a real exception clause."[61] Guenther would disagree with Blomberg's translation here saying that rather it "must be understood as, 'apart from *porneia,'* '*porneia* aside,' or 'excluding the subject of *porneia'*. It does not mean 'except' as it has traditionally been interpreted."[62] There may be some room for disagreement in regard to the translation of this phrase, but "the vast majority of commentators"[63] do take it grammatically as an exception. Blomberg says affirmatively that "*mā epi porneia* should be rendered 'except for sexual sin.'"[64] Similarly, the adverb *parektos* in Matthew 5:32 "follows a distinct syntactic pattern which characterizes the exceptive meaning."[65] Both clauses communicate this exceptive meaning leading now to the exploration of the purpose of the phrases.

These clauses have the purpose of clarifying the universal principles which were stated in the previous verses. Blomberg describes the clause in Matthew 19, saying that "it introduces a qualification to the apparently absolute declarations of vv. 4-8." He goes on to say that it was perfectly acceptable to have such qualifying statements; in fact he says that "speakers and writers regularly proceed in this fashion, expecting their words to be judged by the entire contexts in which they appear."[66] A modern day illustration of this would be if an office

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[61]Blomberg, "Marriage," 175.

[62]Guenther, "Phrases," 96.

[63]Blomberg, "Marriage," 173.

[64]*Ibid.*, 178.

[65]Guenther, "Phrases," 96.

[66]Blomberg, "Marriage," 173.

employee states that he is in his office from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. If he were to go on and clarify saying "except for lunch break," it would not shock any listener. A speaker always assumes that those listening will judge their statements based upon their full contexts. In the same way, when Jesus says, in Matthew 19:6, that what "God has joined together, let no man separate" it should be no surprise when Jesus clarifies by presenting an exception to the principle.[67] What is important to realize is that within the two Matthean passages there is continuity and clarification not disharmony or contradiction. The exception clauses are seen to be completely valid and non-contradictory in their contexts; they should not be seen as mere additions or alterations to Scripture. It seems that the syntactical elements do not require or suggest any specific meaning of the Greek word and should not warrant such a specific translation or understanding.

Conclusion

At the foundation of each of the interpretations of these passages is a different understanding of the term *porneia*. This is precisely why it is essential to have a proper understanding of this Greek word and its usage based upon context, lexicons, and its usage in Matthew, the Gospels and the greater New and Old Testaments. Despite the differing views, it can be agreed, as Murray says, that *porneia* is "the one exception. The husband

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[67]*Ibid.,* 173.

may not put away (divorce) for any other cause."[68] It is important to realize that:

> Given the cultural context of divorce with just cause, and given that *porneia* refers, at least in its most general sense, to licentiousness, we can assume with some confidence that he meant sex on the part of the woman during betrothal or marriage with a man other than her husband.[69]

Despite popular modern belief, as Heth says:

> Incompatibility and fits of anger would not fit under the banner of *porneia*. Also, provision for a spouse's food, clothing, and housing, affection, communication, spiritual leadership, and a host of other qualities, are, no doubt, important requirements in marriage–but failures in these matters do not justify divorce.[70]

In conclusion, one can state with confidence that "*porneia* should therefore be translated 'adultery,' possibly including but not limited to related sexual sins such as incest, homosexuality, prostitution, molestation, or indecent exposure. This is its typical semantic range."[71] The semantic range and context should define the usage of *porneia* or any other word in any passage. As was said earlier, the primary flaw of the betrothal view is that it relies on too specific and technical meaning of *porneia*. The Old and New Testament contexts, the normal lexical use, the Matthean context, and all other evidence seems to point to the majority view interpretation. One cannot limit the meaning of a word in a passage merely because it fits his or her doctrine or held belief, especially when the

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[68]Murray, John, *Divorce (* Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1978), 21.

[69]Janzen, "Porneia," 79.

[70]Heth, "Divorce," 21.

[71]Blomberg, "Marriage," 177.

context does not allow for it. In the case of the Matthean exception clauses, the context seems to leave little or no doubt that is referring to sexual immorality, the physical unfaithfulness of a spouse, and it is seen as the one and only exception to the indissolubility of marriage and an allowance for divorce in the Lord Jesus Christ's teaching found specifically in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9.

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