

THE BETROTHAL VIEW OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

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FEW WOULD DISAGREE WITH THE OBSERVATION THAT the issue of divorce and remarriage is one of the most pressing social concerns today. The demonstrable deterioration of the institutions of marriage and the family in modern society has prompted many within the church to engage in moral evaluation of the practice of divorce and remarriage. Given the possible ramifications of divorce and remarriage, which range from matters related to basic sanctification on a personal level to ministerial qualification on a corporate level,¹ such ethical assessment is commendable. Yet in spite of the attention given to divorce and remarriage, scholars have not been able to construct a standard moral framework for this issue—that is, there is no unanimity of thought on what the Scriptures teach on divorce and remarriage.

Proposals for a Christian ethic of divorce and remarriage are numerous, and several surveys of the major positions are available.² What separates the majority of divorce and remarriage views

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¹ Two of the best works on divorce and remarriage with an emphasis on personal sanctification are Andrew Cornes, *Divorce and Remarriage: Biblical Principles and Pastoral Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); and Johann Christoph Arnold, *Sex, God and Marriage* (Farmington, PA: Plough, 1996). Ed Glasscock has written a good survey of views on the “husband of one wife” clause in 1 Timothy 3:2 and its implications for ministerial qualification (“The Husband of One Wife” Requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 [July–August 1983]: 244–58).

² For example H. Wayne House, ed., *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1990); and Mark L. Strauss, ed., *Remarriage after Divorce in Today's Church: Three Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). With the exception of a few passing references the betrothal view is largely absent from both of these sources. Bruce Vawter has a shorter yet well-written summary of the major views of divorce and remarriage in “The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5.32 and 19.9,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16 (1954): 155–67.

is their interpretation of the so-called “exception clause” in Matthew’s Gospel (5:32; 19:9), and more specifically their understanding of the word *πορνεία* within this clause.³ In many books on divorce and remarriage one view that is mentioned, though usually just in passing, is the betrothal view.⁴ This interpretation 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. Advocates of this view, then, believe that the Bible prohibits marriage partners from actively seeking a divorce, since the exception clause refers to a nuptial custom not followed today.

A review of the citations of the betrothal view in the divorce and remarriage literature reveals that, with very few exceptions,⁵

³ While most of the major views of divorce and remarriage focus on the interpretation of the term *πορνεία* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, there are some notable exceptions. For example the inclusivist view and the preterative view (also known as the exclusivist view or the Augustinian view) focus on the words preceding the term *πορνεία* (i.e., *παρεκτός λόγου* in 5:32 and *μη ἐπι* in 19:9), with the inclusivist view giving the translation “not even in the case of *πορνεία*” and the preterative view rendering “setting aside the matter of *πορνεία*” (cf. Michael Brunec, “Tertio de clausulis divortii,” *Verbum domini* 27 [1949]: 3–16; and Vawter, “The Divorce Clauses in Mt. 5:32 and 19:9,” 163–65).

Moreover, the interpolation view (also known as the traditio-historical view) focuses on the legitimacy of the presence of the exception clause in Matthew, while the assumption view deals with the legitimacy of the exception clause being absent from Mark and Luke. See Robert H. Stein, “Is It Lawful for a Man to Divorce His Wife?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 22 (June 1979): 116–20; and R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1946; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 420. Some advocates of the patristic view focus more on word order and the placement of the exception clause in Jesus’ teaching, as opposed to the precise meaning of the clause itself (e.g., Gordon J. Wenham and William E. Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 2nd ed. [Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002]; and Henri Crouzel, *L'église primitive face au divorce du premier au cinquième siècle* [Paris: Beauchesne, 1971]).

⁴ Brian C. Labosier accurately observes that the betrothal view is “found with moderate frequency in the [divorce and remarriage] literature” (“Matthew’s Exception Clause in the Light of Canonical Criticism: A Case Study in Hermeneutics” [Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1990], 238). The betrothal view is known as the “espousal view” or somewhat misleadingly the “engagement view” (*ibid.*, 116; Paul E. Steele and Charles C. Ryrie, *Meant to Last* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983], 96; and John Coblenz, *What the Bible Says about Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* [Harrisonburg, VA: Christian Light, 1992], 33–38).

⁵ While most authors in the field indicate that they consider the betrothal view a plausible interpretation, an exception is Timothy Crater, who asserts that the view is “an erroneous and dangerous position. . . an artificial interpretation. . . [which] suggests that a pre-determined view has been carried into the text” (“Bill Gothard’s View of the Exception Clause,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 4 [1980]: 5, 8). See also Richard G. Fisher, *A Study in Evolving Fadism: The Dangerous Leanings of Bill Gothard’s Teachings* (St. Louis: Personal Freedom Outreach, 1996). Another example is John Murray, who describes the betrothal view as “untenable” and a “facile

authors find the position to be at least a credible interpretation, even if they do not favor it. For example Instone-Brewer writes, “This is a very plausible explanation,”⁶ and Ryrie notes that the betrothal view “is quite defensible and easily harmonizes with Paul’s summary of the Lord’s teaching.”⁷ However, many interpreters who reference this view do not describe it in detail,⁸ often-times even leveling critiques against the position that betray a general misunderstanding of the view.⁹ Regarding this phenom-

interpretation” that is not worthy of serious academic engagement (*Divorce* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1953], 34 n. 4).

⁶ David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 276.

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, “Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (fall 1982): 188. Also Wenham and Heth write, “It is possible that the divorce which Jesus permits in Matthew’s exception clause is . . . divorce for betrothal unfaithfulness. . . . [It is] a definite possibility and should not be dismissed lightly” (*Jesus and Divorce*, 174, 177). Likewise, although not an advocate of the position, William F. Luck writes, “The betrothal view seems to be correct in arguing that betrothal unfaithfulness is intended by *porneia*” (*Divorce and Remarriage: Recovering the Biblical View* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 95).

⁸ Examples of such superficial discussion of the betrothal view in the divorce and remarriage literature abound. Some examples are Raymond F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 204, 321 n. 124; Jacques DuPont, *Mariage et Divorce dans L’Evangile: Matthieu 19, 3–12 et parallèles* (Abbaye de Saint-André: Desclee de Brouwer, 1959), 108 n. 3; Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 276–77; Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 152 n. 42; Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 94–95; and R. Stanton Norman, “Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Reflections on Divorce, Remarriage, and the Seminary Professor: A Modest Proposal,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 1 (spring 2003): 82–83.

See also the discussions of the betrothal view in D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 414; John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), 306–7, 328; and Charles C. Ryrie, *You Mean the Bible Teaches That?* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 48–49. An example of a nonadvocate of the betrothal view who nevertheless has attempted to engage the position intelligently is Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Marriage and Family in the New Testament,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 256–64; and idem with David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 239–44. Other fairly balanced treatments of the betrothal view by nonadvocates include J. Carl Laney, *The Divorce Myth: A Biblical Examination of Divorce and Remarriage* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1981), 69–70; and Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 169–78.

⁹ For example Wenham and Heth note that “H. Montefiore’s criticisms of the betrothal view either betray his misunderstanding of the authoritative presentation of the view or that he has not read it” (*Jesus and Divorce*, 278 n. 1). The text to which they are referring is H. Montefiore, “Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage,” in *Marriage, Divorce and the Church: The Report of a Commission Appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to Prepare a Statement on the Christian Doctrine of Marriage*, ed. The Church of England (London: SPCK, 1971), 86.

In another work William Heth writes, “It is clear from Edgar’s discussion of the

non Wenham and Heth observe, “This view is often summarily dismissed and considered impossible,”¹⁰ and Chase notes, “This interpretation is generally put aside as unworthy of serious consideration.”¹¹ Difficulty in interacting with the betrothal view is perhaps understandable, for there is no *locus classicus* for this interpretation,¹² and the view has attracted its share of “fringe” advocates who have arguably distorted the position,¹³ while even some

betrothal view that he has not understood the view” (“Response [to Thomas R. Edgar],” in *Divorce and Remarriage: Four Christian Views*, ed. H. Wayne House [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990], 209).

A specific example of a misunderstanding of the betrothal view is that some critics classify the position as a modern-day interpretation, including Collins, who describes it as “novel” (*Divorce in the New Testament*, 321 n. 124). Frederic Henry Chase also mentions that this is a common error among interpreters. “It is said to be not an ancient but a modern interpretation” (*What Did Christ Teach about Divorce?* [London: SPCK, 1921], 27).

While it has never been the majority position of the church, the betrothal view has been present in Christian divorce and remarriage literature for centuries. For example in his remarks on the exception clause, seventeenth-century Puritan writer Matthew Henry noted, “Dr. [Daniel] Whitby understands this, not of adultery, but—because our Saviour uses the word *πορνεία* (fornication)—of uncleanness committed before marriage, but discovered afterward; because, if it were committed after, it was a capital crime, and there needed [be] no divorce. Jesus disallows it in all other cases, ‘Whosoever puts away his wife, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery.’ This is a direct answer to the Pharisees’ query, that it is not lawful” (*Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* [London: Marshall, 1706–29; reprint (6 vols. in 1), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961], 5:270).

Allon Maxwell notes, “The betrothal view . . . is really the early church view, dressed up in a slightly different way” (“Divorce and Remarriage: Sorting Out the Confusion of the Many Conflicting Theories,” *Bible Digest* 42 [March 1994]: n.p.). And Walker Gwynne suggests that this interpretation was the view of the early church, or at least that it is compatible with the patristic view. He wrote that the exception clause “was never meant to contradict three other witnesses [i.e., Mark, Luke, and Paul] to Christ’s teaching. . . . We know that the whole primitive Church understood [this]” (*Holy Matrimony and Common Sense* [London: Longmans, Green, 1930], 133; cf. 144–46).

¹⁰ Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 169.

¹¹ Chase, *What Did Christ Teach about Divorce?* 27.

¹² The work by Abel Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, trans. Neil Tomkinson with Jean Gray (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1965), is considered by many to be the most competent statement of the betrothal view. Wenham and Heth refer to Isaksson’s book as “the authoritative presentation of the view” and the “most authoritative defense” of the view (*Jesus and Divorce*, 278 n. 1, 169). Moreover, Luck writes, “The most able defender of this view is A. Isaksson, who did a noteworthy linguistic study of *porneia*” (*Divorce and Remarriage*, 94). Yet as Wenham and Heth themselves lament, “Evangelicals appear to be largely unaware of Isaksson’s book and though many reviews of it have appeared, we have found none in traditionally evangelical journals” (*Jesus and Divorce*, 278 n. 2).

¹³ Advocates of the betrothal view who fall into this category include controversial Bible teacher Bill Gothard (*Supplementary Alumni Book* [Oak Brook, IL: Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1978–1979], 5:8–9; idem, *Rebuilder’s Guide* [Oak Brook,

of its more competent proponents have not presented it thoroughly.¹⁴ Therefore this interpretation can be difficult to comprehend and articulate, especially when compared with some of the more common ethics of divorce and remarriage. In light of current misunderstandings surrounding the betrothal view, the purpose of this article is to set forth a clear presentation of the betrothal view in hopes that it can serve as a touchstone for understanding this interpretation.

THE PRACTICE OF BETROTHAL

As noted, what separates the majority of divorce and remarriage views is their interpretation of the so-called “exception clause” in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 and more specifically their understanding

IL: Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1982], 55–66); individuals who have produced low-quality self-publications promoting the betrothal view such as Dirk E. T. Evenhuis (*Holy Matrimony* [Smithton, Australia: Circular Head Chronicle, 1997], 50–55) and Joseph A. Webb (*Till Death Do Us Part* [Longwood, FL: Webb Ministries, 1999]), and numerous individuals who have poorly championed the betrothal view on Internet websites.

¹⁴ While there are a fair number of competent writing proponents of the betrothal view on both a popular and an academic level, it is surprising that in their works so few authors interact with each other. Perhaps this can be explained by noting that many advocates of the betrothal view indicate that they have generated this interpretation themselves, through personal Bible study, as opposed to learning it from someone else. For example in 1927 F. S. Stooke-Vaughn of St. John's College (UK) published a booklet that carried endorsements from numerous Anglican divines, in which he presented the betrothal view. In the preface to the second edition of this work he wrote, “It was only when Father Bull, of Mirfield, published his little book on ‘Marriage and Divorce’ that the author of this pamphlet knew anyone else had suggested the same solution of ‘except for fornication.’” Father Bull stated that Dr. Döllinger had the same interpretation” (*The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3–9*, 2nd ed. [Exeter, UK: Eland Bros., 1927], 3). The work by Bull is Paul B. Bull, *Marriage and Divorce* (London: SPCK, 1924), and the work by Döllinger is Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger, *The First Age of Christianity and the Church*, trans. Henry Nutcombe Oxenham (London: Allen, 1866). Similar to Stooke-Vaughn, John Piper writes, “Since I first wrote this exposition of Matthew 19:9 I have discovered other people who hold this view.” Piper then mentions Isaksson's text and the summary of the betrothal view presented by Wenham and Heth (“Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper” [Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 1986], par. 11.2; cf. *idem*, “On Divorce and Remarriage in the Event of Adultery” [Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 1986]).

Yet another example of an autonomous presentation of the betrothal view is William Fisher-Hunter, *The Divorce Problem: Fully Discussed and a Scriptural Solution* (Waynesboro, PA: MacNeish, 1952). He concludes his book, which is a good exegetical defense of the betrothal view within a traditional dispensational framework, with thanksgiving to “our Savior God and Father who by the Holy Spirit exercised and enabled me to produce this written ministry” (*ibid.*, 170). He does not interact with other advocates of the betrothal view in his 173-page work.

of the term *πορνεία* in this clause.¹⁵ That this is the defining characteristic of most views of divorce and remarriage is not surprising, for this clause is an apparent exception to the ostensible injunctions against divorce and remarriage throughout the Scriptures, especially in the corresponding Gospel accounts in Mark 10:2–12 and Luke 16:18.

The burden then is to interpret the exception clause in a manner consistent with other passages on divorce and remarriage—either by demonstrating the clause's legitimacy and assumption elsewhere in Scripture, or by showing that the clause does not constitute an actual exception, thereby making the Matthean divorce pericopes compatible with other biblical passages that seemingly prohibit the practice of divorce and remarriage. Advocates of the betrothal view adopt this latter approach, holding that the exception clause refers to a facet of the Jewish practice of betrothal.

Wight gives the following explanation of this nuptial custom.

A promise of marriage among the Jews of Bible times might mean an engagement without anything definite. There could be a number of engagements broken off. It was the betrothal that was binding, rather than a mere promise of marriage. The promise might be set aside, but a betrothal entered into was considered as final. Among the ancient Hebrews the betrothal was a spoken covenant. . . . The Jewish betrothal in Christ's time was conducted thus: The families of the bride and groom met, with some others to serve as witnesses. The young man would give the young woman either a gold ring, or some article of value, or simply a document in which he promised to marry her. Then he would say: “See by this ring [or this token] thou art set apart for me, according to the law of Moses and of Israel.” The betrothal was not the same as the wedding. At least a whole year elapsed between the betrothal and the actual wedding. These two events must not be confused.¹⁶

¹⁵ Aside from the betrothal view, two perspectives on divorce and remarriage that rest on a particular interpretation of *πορνεία* are the unlawful marriage view (also known as the rabbinic view or the consanguinity view) and the majority view (also known as the Erasmian view or the Protestant view). The unlawful marriage view understands *πορνεία* as a reference either to incest or to interspiritual marriage (F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969], 287–88; and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” *Theological Studies* 37 [June 1976]: 210).

The majority view, held by many contemporary evangelical scholars, interprets *πορνεία* as a reference to adultery. This position, which is present in most modern treatments of divorce and remarriage, has been ably defended by John Murray in *Divorce*. This position is present in most Protestant confessions of faith that address divorce and remarriage, such as the 1646 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 24.5–6.

¹⁶ Fred Wight, *Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* (Moody: Chicago, 1953), 129–30. See also Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* (London: Religious

Heimbach further explains this distinction. “In Semitic practice, the moral and legal obligations of marriage began at betrothal, something that took place before the wedding and before a couple started having a sexual relationship. But betrothal meant a lot more than getting *engaged*. Engaged couples are not married. They *plan* to get married but definitely are *not* married yet. By contrast, a betrothed couple in Bible times was morally and legally married. They already were husband and wife in legal and moral terms.”¹⁷

In summary the practice of betrothal involved a time period, usually twelve months in length,¹⁸ during which a couple was considered morally and legally married, even though they had not yet consummated their relationship. Jewish civil laws that regulated this nuptial custom are recorded in Exodus 21:8–9; Leviticus 19:20–22; Deuteronomy 20:7; 22:23–27, and in the Talmud.¹⁹ Examples of betrothal abound in Scripture, including Lot’s daughters and their husbands (Gen. 19:8, 14), Isaac and Rebekah (24:50–67), Jacob and Rachel (29:18–21), Samson and his Philistine wife (Judg. 14:1–20), David and Michal (1 Sam. 18:27; 2 Sam. 3:14), Joseph and Mary (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:27), God and Israel figuratively (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:14; Hos. 2:19–20), as well as the figurative “betrothal”

Tract Society, 1876), 148–52; idem, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (London: Longmans, Green, 1883), 353–54; Edmond Stapfer, *Palestine in the Time of Christ*, trans. Annie Harwood Holmden (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1885), 160–62; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), 2:121–22; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 367–76; Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 65; and Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 120–21. Reg Harscus gives a good overview of the practice of betrothal in both ancient and modern times (“The Case for Betrothal,” in *Celebrating Christian Marriage*, ed. Adrian Thatcher [Edinburgh: Clark, 2002], 41–54).

¹⁷ Daniel R. Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality: Recovering Biblical Standards for a Culture in Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 146 (italics his); cf. 205.

¹⁸ Scholars disagree on the exact length of the betrothal period in Jewish practice. While Wight claims that it was “at least a whole year” (*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands*, 130), Edershiem says that betrothal was “a period . . . not exceeding a twelvemonth” (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 353). It seems safe to conclude that most betrothals were about a year in length. This is the time frame identified by Jeremias, who writes that it was “ordinarily . . . one year” (*Jerusalem in the Times of Jesus*, 368), and by Gower, who notes that “betrothal lasted for about twelve months” (Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, 65).

¹⁹ Stooke-Vaughn cites several passages from the Babylonian Talmud that mention the practice of betrothal (*The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3–9*, 14–15). See also the references to the Talmud in Bull, *Marriage and Divorce*, 8; and in E. G. Selwyn, “Christ’s Teachings on Marriage and Divorce: A Reply to Dr. Charles,” *Theology* 15 (July–December 1927): 98.

of Christ and the church (Matt. 9:15; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 19:7; 21:9).²⁰

Reasons for the practice of betrothal include allowing the bride and groom time to get better acquainted—a necessity in a culture of arranged marriages—and to give the participating families time to prepare for the ensuing wedding ceremony. However, one of the major reasons for the betrothal period, if not the main reason, was to confirm the bride’s chastity.²¹ This was an important component of the betrothal process, for a bride’s chastity was viewed as an indicator of her commitment to the marriage that was in the process of being realized.

In Jewish practice infidelity in the betrothal period was cause for dissolution of the relationship. It is important to note, however, that while a betrothed couple was considered married for moral and legal purposes, the termination of such a relationship on account of unfaithfulness was not regarded as a divorce as such, but rather as an annulment of the marriage itself. In other words infidelity during the betrothal period was not viewed as an act that could end a marriage, but rather as an event that demonstrated that there had never been a legitimate marriage in the first place. Isaksson comments on this practice of dissolving a betrothal.

A husband’s divorcing such a wife [i.e., one who has been unfaithful during the betrothal period] can equally well be described as the annulment of an unfulfilled contract of sale as a divorce. . . . Although

²⁰ Regarding the relationship between Christ and the church, Isaksson makes the following often overlooked observation: “The marriage symbolism we encounter in the New Testament is not really a marriage symbolism but a betrothal symbolism. In this world the Church is only betrothed to Christ: the marriage will be consummated in the world to come” (*Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 137). On the importance of the symbolism between the husband/wife relationship and the Christ/church or God/Israel relationship see David J. Engelsma, *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ and the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, rev. ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free, 1998).

²¹ John K. Tarwater, apparently following Isaksson, notes that the practice of betrothal “rests upon two key truths: the importance of a man not having sexual relations with his wife after she has had sex with another man and the importance of a bride’s virginity” (*Marriage as Covenant: Considering God’s Design at Creation and the Contemporary Moral Consequences* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006], 113). In Isaksson’s discussion of this concept he makes the interesting observation that Old Testament priests, those positionally closest to God under the sacrificial system, were explicitly forbidden from marrying prostitutes, defiled women, or divorcees, “for the priest is holy to his God” (Lev. 21:7; cf. Ezek. 44:22), and the high priest, who most clearly represented God, could not marry a prostitute, a defiled woman, a divorcee, or even a widow. Rather, the high priest had to marry a virgin in accord with Leviticus 21:14. Isaksson finds this significant for the church in light of the fact that New Testament believers are described as “a royal priesthood” in 1 Peter 2:9 (Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 23–25).

the term divorce was used in these cases, it is more accurate to say that it was a matter of cancelling an unfulfilled contract of sale, because one of the parties had tricked the other as to the nature of the goods. . . . The word divorce is used even when a man divorces his wife because of her premarital unchastity. Actually he does not divorce his wife but is himself relieved by a court order of the need to fulfill his obligations under the marriage contract, since it has been established that the other party has deceived him.²²

Gwynn writes, "A divorce granted under such circumstances [i.e., infidelity of one of the parties] would be the equivalent of a declaration that there had never been a true marriage."²³ Advocates of the betrothal view assert that this practice of nullifying an unconsummated marriage during the betrothal period because of unfaithfulness is the event in view in the Matthean exception clause.

EVIDENCE FOR THE BETROTHAL VIEW

In general, proponents of the betrothal view have supported their position with two key arguments, the first of which focuses on the context of Matthew's Gospel.

THE JEWISH CONTEXT OF MATTHEW

Since πορνεία, the pivotal word in the exception clause, is a general term for sexual sin,²⁴ its exact meaning must be informed by the

²² Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 137, 140.

²³ Gwynn, *Holy Matrimony and Common Sense*, 136. Similarly J. Dwight Pentecost writes that this procedure involved the "cancellation of a marriage contract . . . before the marriage had been completed" (*The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 358). Wenham and Heth note, "This is not actually a divorce, though a legal bill of divorce was required by the Jews in such cases" (*Jesus and Divorce*, 170). Ryrie explains that dissolving a betrothal on account of infidelity "is actually not a divorce . . . [but] cancelling an unfulfilled contract" ("Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage," 187). And Chase writes, "If a woman was proved guilty of premarital unchastity, the marriage, as we should say, might be regarded as void *ab initio*" (*What Did Christ Teach about Divorce?* 28).

²⁴ While the standard Greek lexicons and concordances agree that the term πορνεία is an ambiguous word that can refer to all types of sexual sin, Bruce Malina concludes that the meaning of πορνεία is not as broad as some scholars have thought. "What makes a given line of conduct *porneia*, hence unlawful, is that it is expressly prohibited by Torah." While this sounds plausible, Malina then claims, "It would appear that in no case is pre-betrothal, non-commercial, non-cultic heterosexual intercourse (what is commonly called 'fornication' today) prohibited!" ("Does Porneia Mean Fornication?" *Novum Testamentum* 14 [January 1972]: 15). Malina's conclusions were challenged in Joseph Jensen, "Does Porneia Mean Fornication? A Critique of Bruce Malina," *Novum Testamentum* 20 (July 1978): 161–84. The term πορνεία occurs twenty-six times in the New Testament in twelve books (Matt. 5:32;

context. Advocates of the betrothal view contend that it is not just the proximate context of the exception clause that gives the word πορνεία its meaning, but rather the milieu of the entire Book of Matthew. Since Matthew's Gospel is widely recognized as written for a Jewish audience,²⁵ champions of the betrothal view suggest that it is reasonable to understand the Matthean exception clause as a reference to infidelity during the betrothal period. For example Grant supports the betrothal view with this observation: "Mark 10:11–12 represents an attempt to formulate our Lord's teaching as law under *Gentile* conditions. . . . Matt. 19:9 represents a parallel attempt to formulate it as law under *Jewish* conditions. . . . This is entirely within the Jewish-Christian horizon; the motivation is Christian, and the conditions presupposed are Jewish."²⁶

An appeal to the Jewish context of Matthew's Gospel is made by the majority of advocates of the betrothal view.²⁷ This is not surprising, for as Labosier notes, "It is the context of Matthew 5 and 19 that provides the strongest evidence for this interpretation of

15:19; 19:9; Mark 7:21; John 8:41; Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25; Rom. 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:1 [twice]; 6:13, 18; 7:2; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 2:21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2). A review of these passages supports Jensen's conclusions, not Malina's.

²⁵ Cf. Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980); Andrew J. Overman, *Matthew's Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); Anthony J. Saldarini, *Matthew's Christian-Jewish Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Donald Senior, "Between Two Worlds: Gentiles and Jewish Christians in Matthew's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61 (January 1999): 1–23.

²⁶ Fredrick C. Grant, "The Proposed Marriage Canon," *Anglican Theological Review* 22 (July 1940): 172–73 (italics his). When commenting on the exception clause in another work Grant wrote, "*Porneia* is simply not adultery but fornication. . . . Of course such a situation could only arise in a conservative Jewish Christian milieu, where the Mosaic code was still in force; and such a milieu is presupposed by much of the material in the Gospel of Matthew" ("The Mind of Christ on Marriage," in *Five Essays on Marriage*, ed. Burton Scott Easton [Louisville: Cloister, 1946], 36).

²⁷ Cf. Coblenz, *What the Bible Says about Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 34–35; Döllinger, *The First Age of Christianity and the Church*, 372; Evenhuis, *Holy Matrimony*, 50–55; Mark Geldard, "Jesus' Teaching on Divorce: Thoughts on the Meaning of Porneia in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9," *Churchman* 92 (1978): 141; Gothard, *Supplementary Alumni Handbook*, 5:8; Gwynn, *Holy Matrimony and Common Sense*, 135–39; Heimbach, *True Sexual Morality*, 205–6; Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 131, 139–41; Labosier, "Matthew's Exception Clause," 201; Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 357–58; Arne Rudvin, "What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage," *Dagen* (1994): 7–8; Selwyn, "Christ's Teachings on Divorce and Remarriage," 99; Stooke-Vaughn, *The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3–9*, 10; and Tarwater, *Marriage as Covenant*, 119–21.

of πορνεία as referring to such things as . . . betrothal unfaithfulness.²⁸ In fact many proponents of the betrothal view not only understand the exception clause to be a reference to the annulment of marriage during the betrothal period, but also suggest that this was an exception that Jesus had to make for His Jewish listeners “if he did not wish to side with the swindler instead of the person swindled.”²⁹ In their explanation of the betrothal view Steele and Ryrie observe that “for Christ to not address Himself to this possibility would have opened the way to misunderstanding and shut the door on [the possibility of the dissolution of a betrothal].”³⁰ This, of course, would have put Jesus in the awkward position of teaching contrary to Old Testament law and Jewish tradition, as well as ostensibly endorsing injustice.

A piece of evidence cited by many proponents of the betrothal view to corroborate the contextual support for this interpretation is the betrothal of Mary and Joseph.³¹ Advocates of the betrothal view note that only Matthew, in his Jewish-oriented Gospel, mentioned Joseph’s intent to divorce Mary on account of her apparent unfaithfulness during their betrothal period.³² Given Matthew’s

description of Joseph as a “just man” (Matt. 1:19), champions of this interpretation suggest that it was necessary for Matthew to publish Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage in a format that would vindicate, not implicate, Joseph for his previously reported intent to divorce Mary. As Pentecost suggests, “It was in light of this context that Christ granted the exception.”³³ And Isaksson notes the following.

It is very unlikely that it would be related of him [Joseph] that he decided to do something which clearly conflicted with the teaching that Jesus gave, according to the account later in the Gospel, concerning a man’s right to divorce his wife. We may assume that, when it is related that Joseph thought of divorcing Mary because he believed she was guilty of unchastity (πορνεία), what he planned to do is not to be understood as being at variance with what Mary’s son later taught, according to Mt. 19.9, since this teaching also permitted divorce on the ground of πορνεία. The word πορνεία in this clause should be understood as referring to the same kind of unchastity as that [which] Joseph suspected Mary of, i.e. premarital unchastity.³⁴

Few critics of the betrothal view have noted the contextual support advanced by its proponents. Most interpreters, however, agree that the exception clause at least incorporates divorce on account of betrothal unfaithfulness. An exception, however, is Laney, who, perhaps misjudging the significance of betrothal in a Jewish context, writes, “The most obvious objection to the betrothal thesis is that Jesus and the Pharisees were not discussing betrothal but marriage.”³⁵ Yet Laney seems to sense a weakness in this objec-

²⁸ Labosier, “Matthew’s Exception Clause,” 239. Labosier also notes that the Jewish nature of Matthew’s Gospel is an “advantage of this interpretation,” and that “the key to interpreting the meaning of πορνεία as it is used in the Matthean exception clause lies in appreciating its context” (ibid., 201, 248).

²⁹ Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 140. In their explanation of the betrothal view Wenham and Heth likewise note, “If Jesus had not made this exception to His teaching of ‘no divorce,’ the Pharisees could have accused him of siding with . . . the swindler” (*Jesus and Divorce*, 170).

³⁰ Steele and Ryrie, *Meant to Last*, 91.

³¹ Cf. James Montgomery Boice, “The Biblical View of Divorce,” *Eternity*, December 1970, 20; James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 138–39; Bull, *Marriage and Divorce*, 8; Coblenz, *What the Bible Says about Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*, 35; Döllinger, *The First Age of Christianity and the Church*, 373–74; Evenhuis, *Holy Matrimony*, 50–55; Geldard, “Jesus’ Teaching on Divorce,” 139; Gothard, *Rebuilders Guide*, 55; idem, *Supplementary Alumni Handbook*, 5:8; Gwynn, *Holy Matrimony and Common Sense*, 139–43; Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 138–39; Labosier, “Matthew’s Exception Clause,” 217, 238; Noah Lathrop, “The Holy Scriptures and Divorce,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 56 (April–June 1899): 271; I. Howard Marshall, “Divorce,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:506; Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 357; Piper, “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper,” par. 11.2; Rudvin, “What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage,” 8; Stooke-Vaughn, *The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3–9*, 16–18; and Tarwater, *Marriage as Covenant*, 120–21.

³² Of the fourteen references to Joseph in the New Testament, half occur in Matthew’s Gospel (1:16, 18–20, 24; 2:13, 19), five are in Luke (1:27; 2:4, 16, 23–24), and two are in the Gospel of John (1:45; 6:42).

³³ Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 357.

³⁴ Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 139. Stooke-Vaughn similarly notes, “We are not surprised to find this [the account of Mary and Joseph] so explicitly given in S. Matthew concerning divorce of betrothed for fornication. . . . To sum this up we see why ‘except for fornication’ is in S. Matthew’s Gospel and not in S. Mark or S. Luke, because S. Matthew’s Gospel was written for Jews who had the ceremony of ‘betrothal,’ when even before the actual marriage had taken place the ‘betrothed’ were regarded as man and wife. Divorce was permitted for ‘fornication’ of the betrothed as we see in the same Gospel of S. Matthew, in the case of Joseph and Mary ‘before they came together’” (*The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3–9*, 17–18).

³⁵ Laney, *The Divorce Myth*, 70. Similarly Crater writes, “Jesus made clear he was talking about consummated marriages when He gave His rule. . . . The betrothal idea is simply foreign to the text. . . . By the admission of all, the teaching of Matthew 19 was directed against the capricious breakup of consummated marriages” (“Bill Gothard’s View of the Exception Clause,” 7–8). Likewise Feinberg and Feinberg object, saying that “nothing in Matthew 19 suggests that Jesus speaks of sex during the betrothal period” (*Ethics for a Brave New World*, 328). Moreover, concerning the betrothal interpretation of the exception clause Murray notes, “In the preceding context of both passages (Matt. 5:31; 19:7, 8; cf. Mark 10:3–5) explicit reference is made to the provisions of Deuteronomy 24:1–4, where the wife in ques-

tion, for he qualifies his claim with the caveat, “It could be argued that the binding nature of betrothal among the Jews was unique.”³⁶ In response to Laney’s criticism, Luck, who is not an advocate of the betrothal view, remarks, “I am not impressed with Laney’s objection that Jesus and the Pharisees are not discussing betrothal but rather marriage in Matt. 19. . . . [It] misses the point that the Jewish mind would have seen betrothal unfaithfulness as a foregone conclusion had the discussion become more specific.”³⁷

LEXICAL SUPPORT FOR THE BETROTHAL VIEW

A second argument employed by advocates of the betrothal view marshals lexical support for interpreting πορνεία as infidelity during the betrothal period. One way this has been done is to show that πορνεία is used in Scripture, aside from the exception clause, to denote betrothal unfaithfulness.³⁸ An example, cited by propo-

tion cannot be simply a betrothed woman. Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 were spoken in direct reference to the question posed by Deuteronomy 24:1–4 and hence the relationship expressed by the word ‘wife’ in Matthew 19:9 cannot be different from that supplied by verses 7 and 8 and the wife of verse 9, then the subject of discourse would have been abruptly changed and the contrast between our Lord’s provision and the Mosaic permission would be eliminated. The terms of the contrast initiated by the formula, ‘But I say unto you’ require us to regard the relationship expressed by the word ‘wife’ as the same in both cases” (*Divorce*, 34 n. 4).

A second argument Laney advances against the Jewish context to which proponents of the betrothal view appeal is that the Greeks and Romans also practiced betrothal. “This interpretation of *porneia* [i.e., the betrothal view] would not account for the absence of the exception in Mark and Luke, for both the Greeks and Romans, as well as the Jews, had such a betrothal period to which the exception would apply” (*The Divorce Myth*, 70). Yet the very articles to which Laney appeals in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* in order to justify his critique invalidate his argument; for the one on Greek betrothal notes that the practice had been superseded by the second century B.C., and the one on Roman betrothal notes that the practice of betrothal was nothing more than “an informal agreement to marry, voidable at will” (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [1970], 166). Although not critiquing Laney by name, Wenham and Heth note, “Mark and Luke, writing to largely Gentile audiences, had no need to record such an exception relating to binding betrothal agreements. In Roman law, bride-money to guarantee that a betrothal agreement would be honored was only introduced in Byzantine times” (*Jesus and Divorce*, 171).

³⁶ Laney, *The Divorce Myth*, 69–70.

³⁷ Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 285–86 n. 33.

³⁸ In his exhaustive study of πορνεία Isaksson concludes that not only is betrothal unfaithfulness a possible meaning of πορνεία, but also that it is the dominant meaning of the term. “Linguistically speaking, the most probable meaning of πορνεία, when used in a statement of a legal nature about a married woman’s crime, is undoubtedly premarital unchastity” (*Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 140). Even some nonadvocates of the betrothal view seem to have conceded this point. For example in their critique of the betrothal view Feinberg and Feinberg write, “Even if premarital sex is the most common meaning of *porneia*, it is not the only possible meaning” (*Ethics for a Brave New World*, 328). Similarly in their discussion of the betrothal view Wenham and Heth refer to πορνεία and “its usual meaning of pre-

nents of the betrothal view, is the Septuagint rendering of Deuteronomy 22:13–21. In regard to this passage Chase writes,

Now I venture to say that, when a Jew read the exceptive clause in St. Matthew, a passage in Deuteronomy would at once have come into his mind. It is there (Deut. xxii. 13–21) provided that, if a man marries and after marriage discovers that the woman is not a virgin, he may make his accusation against her known. If, according to the evidence prescribed, “this thing be true,” then the woman shall be stoned “because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the harlot in her father’s house (ἐκπορνέουσαι τὸν οἶκον τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῆς).” It will be observed that the verb used here in the LXX (ἐκπορνέουσαι) corresponds to the Greek substantive πορνεία (fornication) used in St. Matthew.³⁹

Another verse appealed to by advocates of the betrothal view is John 8:41. In this passage Jesus informed the Pharisees that Abraham was not their father, and they responded with the back-handed claim, “We were not born of fornication [πορνεία]; we have one Father: God.” As Piper explains, in this verse the Jewish leaders “indirectly accuse Jesus of being born of *porneia*. In other words, since they don’t accept the virgin birth, they assume that Mary had committed fornication and Jesus was the result of this act.”⁴⁰ Although Wenham and Heth object to making the use of πορνεία in this verse a precedent for delimiting the meaning of the term, they nevertheless conclude, “The term *porneia* is clearly appropriate [in John 8:41] for such an unlawful act if the illegitimate birth is the intended reference.”⁴¹ This verse along with Deuteronomy 22:13–21 seems to show that πορνεία was used in the Scrip-

marital or radically unlawful sexual intercourse” (*Jesus and Divorce*, 170).

³⁹ Chase, *What Did Christ Teach about Divorce?* 27–28. Regarding this same passage Rudvin writes, “Some theologians . . . reject [the view] that ‘porneia’ means sexual relations with others before marriage or betrothal, because they cannot find the word used this way. But they have overlooked that it is exactly this word which is used in Deuteronomy 22:21, where it says that the girl has committed ‘ze-not/porneia’ in, or ‘against,’ her father’s house” (“What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage,” 8). See also Bull, *Marriage and Divorce*, 8–9; and Isaksson, *Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 135, 139.

⁴⁰ Piper, “Divorce and Remarriage: A Position Paper,” par. 11.2. Raymond Brown writes, “Jesus has been talking about his heavenly Father and about their father, but were there not rumors about his own birth? Was there not some question of whether he was really the son of Joseph? . . . The Jews may be saying, ‘We were not born illegitimate [but you were].’ There is an early witness to Jewish attacks on the legitimacy of Jesus’ birth in Origen *Against Celsus* I 28 (GCS 2:79); and the *Acts of Pilate* II 3, has the Jews charging Jesus: ‘You were born of fornication’” (*The Gospel according to John* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970], 1:357). See also Dollinger, *The First Age of Christianity and the Church*, 434; and Ryrie, “Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage,” 187.

⁴¹ Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 175.

tures to refer to infidelity during the betrothal period.⁴²

An additional means of lexical support advanced by proponents of the betrothal view is to argue that the contextual referent of πορνεία is betrothal unfaithfulness. When the Pharisees asked Jesus to give His interpretation of the Mosaic divorce legislation, in all likelihood they were inquiring about the meaning of the phrase “some indecency” (עֲרוֹת דָּבָר) in Deuteronomy 24:1, which was a topic of debate among the Jewish religious leaders. In view of the Pharisees’ question some proponents of the betrothal view have argued that Jesus’ reference to πορνεία in the exception clause correlates to עֲרוֹת דָּבָר in Deuteronomy 24:1, which they understand to be a law allowing for divorce on account of betrothal unfaithfulness. For instance Boice writes, “The natural implication of Matthew 5:32 [and 19:9] is that . . . a man may divorce a woman immediately after marriage if he finds her not to be a virgin, in which case he was allowed by the law to remarry and was not to be called an adulterer—Deut. 24:1–4. . . . [The exception clause] is in essence an explanation of Deuteronomy 24:1–4.”⁴³ While a link between

⁴² Another argument employed by some proponents of this interpretation is that πορνεία is not used in reference to other sexual sins, especially the sin of adultery. For example Döllinger claims that πορνεία “is always applied to the sin of an unmarried person, not to unfaithfulness in a wife, which is constantly described by another word (μοιχεία) both in the Old and New Testaments. . . . πορνεία always means incontinence in the unmarried, never, either in the New Testament or in the Septuagint or in the profane authors adultery” (*The First Age of Christianity and the Church*, 373, 434). Similarly Rudvin writes, “Even though it is often claimed in superficial commentaries, it cannot be clearly shown that ‘porneia’ is used as a generic term. . . . Neither can it be shown that ‘zenut/’porneia’ is used with the direct meaning ‘adultery’ in the Old or the New Testament” (“What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage,” 7). Likewise Isaksson notes, “We cannot get away from the fact that the distinction between what was regarded as πορνεία and what was to be regarded as μοιχεία was very strictly maintained in pre-Christian Jewish literature and in the N.T. Πορνεία may, of course, denote different forms of forbidden sexual relations, but we can find no unequivocal examples of the use of this word to denote a wife’s adultery” (*Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple*, 134). Cf. Chase, *What Did Christ Teach about Divorce?*, 61–64. Lathrop writes, “The Greek word used by Christ [πορνεία] is, so far as I can ascertain, never used in the LXX, the New Testament Greek, nor in classic Greek to mean adultery” (“The Holy Scriptures and Divorce,” 271). In a contrasting view Instone-Brewer writes, “It is undeniable that porneia is sometimes used as a synonym of moicheia, and that this is the more natural meaning in the context of Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees” (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 277). Yet Instone-Brewer fails to offer any evidence for the connection between πορνεία and μοιχεία.

⁴³ Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 137. Likewise Tarwater notes, “Whatever the nature of the ‘uncleanness’ (עֲרוֹת דָּבָר), it cannot include adultery or fornication. Consequently, this has led numerous theologians to conclude the betrothal period is the proper context in which Deuteronomy twenty-four must be understood. . . . According to the betrothal argument, Deuteronomy twenty-four allows for the dissolution of a betrothed couple, as long as the relationship had not been consummated. . . .

πορνεία and עֲרוֹת דָּבָר has been suggested by both advocates and nonadvocates of the betrothal view,⁴⁴ since this connection, as well as the identification of עֲרוֹת דָּבָר with betrothal unfaithfulness is less than sure, not all proponents of the betrothal view have argued along these lines.⁴⁵ Yet if this connection and identification

Proponents of this view assume that Deuteronomy twenty-four deals with a betrothal and not a sexually consummated marriage” (*Marriage as Covenant*, 114, 119). Similarly Rudvin writes, “In Matthew 19:9 Jesus thus gives his authoritative interpretation of ‘an indecent thing’ in Deuteronomy 24:1. He says that a divorce or an annulment of a marriage is only permissible when the marriage was based on false grounds and therefore not valid” (“What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage,” 9). See also Boice, “The Biblical View of Divorce,” 20–21; Döllinger, *The First Age of Christianity and the Church*, 373; and Lathrop, “The Holy Scriptures and Divorce,” 270–71.

⁴⁴ Alan Hugh M’Neile, not an advocate of the betrothal view, writes that “λόγος πορνείας may be equivalent to ‘a matter of unchastity’ which is a transposition of עֲרוֹת דָּבָר in Dt. xxiv. 1” (*The Gospel according to St. Matthew* [London: Macmillan, 1915], 66). Instone-Brewer claims, “The most likely reason for using the term πορνεία or λόγος πορνείας is that this is the most accurate translation of עֲרוֹת דָּבָר (Deuteronomy 24:1 ‘indecent matter’). . . . Therefore, it is likely that the exception that occurs in Matthew is a literal translation of עֲרוֹת דָּבָר in Deuteronomy 24:1” (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 158–59).

⁴⁵ A reading of betrothal advocates’ works reveals reasons why some proponents of this view have not tried to show a lexical connection between עֲרוֹת דָּבָר and πορνεία in order to bolster their interpretation. First, some who hold this position believe that Jesus’ comments on the Mosaic exception in Matthew 19:8 and His statement of the exception clause in verse 9 are syntactically juxtaposed; therefore עֲרוֹת דָּבָר and πορνεία could not be connected. For instance Geldard writes that one of the four conditions that any translation of *porneia* must meet in order to be acceptable is that “the translation must preserve the obviously real conflict between Jesus and the Mosaic concession” (“Jesus’ Teaching on Divorce,” 139).

Second, some proponents of the betrothal view do not believe that Deuteronomy 24:1 is addressing divorce on account of betrothal unfaithfulness. If this is the case, then a connection between עֲרוֹת דָּבָר and πορνεία would actually undermine the betrothal interpretation. Labosier notes, “The possibility of a betrothed virgin being defiled is handled in Deuteronomy 22:23–27 and does not fit the situation of Deuteronomy 24:1. Even the case of premarital sex involving the betrothed couple themselves is covered by Deuteronomy 22:28–29 and does not fit the context of divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1” (“Matthew’s Exception Clause,” 159).

Third, some betrothal-view advocates observe that whatever עֲרוֹת דָּבָר means in Deuteronomy 24:1, Jesus seems to have claimed that it was sinful (cf. Matt. 19:8, “Because of the hardness of your heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives”). Therefore a connection between עֲרוֹת דָּבָר and πορνεία would be undesirable.

Fourth, some proponents of the betrothal view, as with many who champion other interpretations of the exception clause, believe that Deuteronomy 24:1 is narrative in nature, not prescriptive. This distinction rests on whether one understands the verb וְכָתַב in that verse in a jussive sense (i.e., “let him write”), as does the King James Version, or as an indicative verb (i.e., “and he writes”), as do most modern translations. If the text is narrative, then there would be little benefit in connecting עֲרוֹת דָּבָר and πορνεία, for no command in Deuteronomy 24:1 would relate to Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 regarding divorce and remarriage.

are valid, it provides additional support for the betrothal view.⁴⁶

Many critics of the betrothal interpretation have focused their attention on the lexical support advanced by proponents of this view, claiming it to be insufficient. For example Carson writes, “There is no reason to adopt this [view] . . . *Porneia* is being squeezed into too narrow a semantic range.”⁴⁷ Ryrie notes that the “weakness [of the betrothal view] lies in the technical meaning given to *porneia*.”⁴⁸ Keener claims that this position “unnaturally restricts the sense of ‘immorality’ [πορνεία].”⁴⁹ And Wenham and Heth conclude, “The major critique of this view . . . is that the betrothal unchastity meaning of *porneia* is far too restricted.”⁵⁰

Yet in response to such criticism, betrothal-view advocates point out that nearly every major Christian view of divorce and remarriage limits the meaning of πορνεία in some sense, whether it be to adultery, incest, betrothal unfaithfulness, or a combination of potential renderings. The only alternative would be to incorporate all the possible meanings of πορνεία into Jesus’ teaching; however, this would seemingly constitute the hermeneutical error of illegitimate totality transfer.⁵¹ Therefore the question is not *whether* to limit the meaning of πορνεία but rather *how* to limit its meaning. Proponents of the betrothal view believe that they have the best

⁴⁶ One additional piece of lexical support for the betrothal view has been suggested by Stooke-Vaughn. “There is remarkable confirmation that in S. Matthew it [πορνεία] refers to betrothal, for the Syriac has, ‘a writing of breaking a contract’ in the Peshito-Kethovo *d’dulolo*—the latter word means breaking a contract. This also occurs in the Sinaitic Palimpsest in S. Matthew xix. as well as S. Matthew v” (*The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3–9, 15*).

⁴⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 414.

⁴⁸ Ryrie, “Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage,” 188.

⁴⁹ Keener, *And Marries Another*, 152 n. 42.

⁵⁰ Wenham and Heth, *Jesus and Divorce*, 176. Similarly Instone-Brewer writes, “The main problem with [the] narrow definition [i.e., betrothal unfaithfulness] is that there is nothing to indicate that Jesus meant to limit the meaning of his exception in this way” (*Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, 276). See also Luck, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 95; Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 328; and Labosier, “Matthew’s Exception Clause,” 186.

⁵¹ James Barr describes illegitimate totality transfer as “the error that arises when the meaning of a word (understood as the total series of relations in which it is used in the literature) is read in to a particular case as its sense and implication there” (*The Semantics of Biblical Language* [London: Oxford University Press, 1961], 218). D. A. Carson identifies illegitimate totality transfer, which he calls the fallacy of unwarranted adoption of an expanded semantic field, as “the supposition that the meaning of a word in a specific context is much broader than the context itself allows” (*Exegetical Fallacies* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 60).

answer to this question, which they support with the aforementioned contextual and lexical evidence.

CONCLUSION

After surveying the evidence for the betrothal view of divorce and remarriage, it seems safe to conclude that this interpretation of Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is a position that deserves a place at the table of moral discussion. Indeed proponents of the betrothal view span both time and theological tradition, and there is no indication that this interpretation will disappear any time in the near future.⁵² While not all Bible interpreters will agree with the conclusions reached by those who hold this view, responsible exegetes would be wise to consider this position with an open mind, not only in order to facilitate intelligent discussion with betrothal-view advocates, but also because this interpretation could be correct.

⁵² With the rise of the covenant marriage movement it seems likely that less permissive views of divorce and remarriage, such as the betrothal view, will grow in popularity. See Gordon Hugenberger, *Marriage as Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Fred Lowery, *Covenant Marriage: Staying Together for Life* (West Monroe, LA: Howard, 2002); Gary Chapman, *Covenant Marriage: Building Communication and Intimacy* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003); David W. Jones and John K. Tarwater, “Are Biblical Covenants Dissolvable? Toward a Theology of Marriage,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 47 (fall 2004): 1–11; and John Witte Jr. and Eliza Ellison, eds., *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).