THE BETROTHAL VIEW OF DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

David W. Jones

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, 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. What separates the majority of divorce and remarriage views 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.

David W. Jones is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, North Carolina.

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, 1999); 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.

3 While most of the major views of divorce and remarriage focus on the interpretation of the term παρευρίσκεται 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 παρευρίσκεται (i.e., προσερχόμεθα λόγου in 5:32 and προσερχόμεθα in 19:9), with the inclusivist view giving the translation "not even in the case of παρευρίσκεται" and the preterative view rendering "setting aside the matter of παρευρίσκεται" (cf. Michael Bruce, "Tertio de clausulis divorci," Verbum domini 27 [1949]: 3-16; and Vawter, "The Divorce Clauses in Mt 5:32 and 19:9," 163-65).

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 [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 Radism: 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 "an artificial interpretation of the so-called "exception clause" in Matthew's Gospel (5:32; 19:9), and more specifically their understanding of the word παρευρίσκεται within this clause. In many books on divorce and remarriage one view that is mentioned, though usually just in passing, is the betrothal view. 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,
This page contains a discussion on the betrothal view of divorce and remarriage in the context of the New Testament. The author mentions that Paul's summary of the Lord's teaching on divorce and remarriage seems to be correct in arguing for a light view. The author also references Charles C. Ryrie's critique of the betrothal view, noting that it is possible that divorce for unfaithfulness is intended by porneia (adultery). The author cites examples of scholars who have advocated for the betrothal view, such as A. Isaksson, H. Montefiore, and Raymond F. Collins. The text also acknowledges the presence of the betrothal view in Christian divorce and remarriage literature for centuries, and discusses the difficulties in interacting with the betrothal view. The author notes that the textual interpretation of the betrothal view is often defensible and easily harmonizes with Paul's teaching, although it is sometimes even leveled critiques against the position that betray a general misunderstanding of the view. The author concludes by highlighting the importance of understanding the different interpretations and views on divorce and remarriage in the New Testament.
of its more competent proponents have not presented it thoroughly. 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 of the term ἁπάτεια in this clause. 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.

Aside from the betrothal view, two perspectives on divorce and remarriage that rest on a particular interpretation of ἁπάτεια 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 ἁπάτεια 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" in *Exts and Some New Palestinian Evidence," *Theological Studies* 27 [June 1976]: 210).

The major view, held by many contemporary evangelical scholars, interprets ἁπάτεια 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*, 24.6-8.

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 (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"

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, divorced 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 divorced woman, a divorcer, 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 porneia, the pivotal word in the exception clause, is a general term for sexual sin,24 its exact meaning must be informed by the

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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 porneia is an ambiguous word that can refer to all types of sexual sin, Bruce Malina concludes that the meaning of porneia 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 heterno-ssexual 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): 181–84. The term porneia occurs twenty-six times in the New Testament in twelve books (Matt. 5:22, 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.
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).
of ἐνενεία as referring to such things as . . . betrothal unfaithfulness.” 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.” 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].”

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. 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. 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.” 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 (ἐνενεία), 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 ἐνενεία. The word ἐνενεία 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.

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.” Yet Laney seems to sense a weakness in this objec-

28 Laboissier, “Matthew’s Exception Clause,” 239. Laboissier 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 ἐνενεία as it is used in the Matthean exception clause lies in appreciating its context” (ibid., 201, 245).

29 Isaksson, Marriage and Ministry in the New Testament, 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.


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).


34 Isaksson, Marriage and Ministry in the New Testament, 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 note 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 Guthard’s View of the Exception Clause,” 7–8). Likewise Feinberg and Feinberg claim that nothing in Matthew suggests that Jesus was speaking 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." 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-

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 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 (ἐκπορνεύει τῷ οίκῳ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῆς)." It will be observed that the verb used here in the LXX (ἐκπορνεύομαι) 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 πορνεία. 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 πορνεία 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-

36 Laney, The Divorce Myth, 69-70.
37 Luck, Divorce and Remarriage, 286-86 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 Testament, 140). Even some non-advocates of the betrothal view seem to have conceded this point. For example in their critique of the betrothal view Peinberg and Peinberg write, "Even if premarital sex is the most common meaning of πορνεία, 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-

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 're-
not 'porneia', in, or against,' her father's house" ("What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage," 8). See also Bull, Marriage and Divorce, 6-9; and Isaksson, Marriage and Ministry in the New Testament, 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 Celsum 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 Dölger, 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.

An additional means of lexical support advanced by proponents of the betrothal view is to argue that the contextual referent of πόρνεια 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" (הַשָּׁמֶשׁ) 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 πόρνεια in the exception clause correlates to הַשָּׁמֶשׁ 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 πόρνεια is not used in reference to other sexual sins, especially the sin of adultery. For example Dollinger claims that πόρνεια "is always applied to a married, not to a unmarried, woman, which is constantly described by another word (μοῖρα) in both the Old and New Testaments. . . . πόρνεια 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 'zenvet/porneia is used with the direct meaning 'adultery' in the Old or the New Testament'" ("What Jesus Said about Divorce and Remarriage."). Likewise Isakovitz notes, "We cannot get away from the fact that the distinction between what was regarded as πόρνεια and what was to be regarded as μοῖρα was very strictly maintained in pre-Christian Jewish literature and in the N.T. πόρνεια 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 [πόρνεια] 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 πόρνεια is sometimes used as a synonym of μοῖρα, 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 πόρνεια and μοῖρα.

43 Boice, The Sermon on the Mount, 137. Likewise Tarwater notes, "Whatever the nature of the 'uncleanness' (הַשָּׁמֶשׁ), 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.

πόρνεια and הַשָּׁמֶשׁ has been suggested by both advocates and nonadvocates of the betrothal view, 44 since this connection, as well as the identification of הַשָּׁמֶשׁ 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 indecency' 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; Dollinger, 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 "κόσος πόρνειας may be equivalent to 'a matter of unchastity' which is a transposition of הַשָּׁמֶשׁ 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 πόρνεια or μοῖρα is that this is the most acceptable translation of Deuteronomy 24:1 'indecent matter' . . . Therefore, it is likely that the exception that occurs in Matthew is a literal translation of הַשָּׁמֶשׁ 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 הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and πόρνεια 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 הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and πόρνεια could not be connected. For instance Geldard writes that one of the four conditions that any translation of πόρνεια 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 הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and πόρνεια would actually undermine the betrothal interpretation. Lominos writes, "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 הַשָּׁמֶשׁ 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"). The connection between הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and πόρνεια 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 בָּשַׁמֵּשׁ 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 write"), as do most modern translations. If the text is narrative, then there would be little benefit in connecting הַשָּׁמֶשׁ and πόρνεια, 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' [porneia]."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 porneia 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 porneia 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 porneia but rather how to limit its meaning. Proponents of the betrothal view believe that they have the best

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46 One additional piece of lexical support for the betrothal view has been suggested by Stocke-Vaughn. "There is remarkable confirmation that in S. Matthew it [porneia] refers to betrothal, for the Syriac has, 'a writing of breaking a contract' in the Peschito-Kethvo d'aulolo—the latter word means breaking a contract. This also occurs in the Sinaitic Palmseest in S. Matthew xix., as well as S. Matthew xii. (The Solution of St. Matthew v. 31, 32, and xix. 3-9, 15).


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; Fenzberg and Fenzberg, 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).

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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.

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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, 1989); Fred Lawry, 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).