

WHAT IS "PORNEIA"? A HEBREW AND GREEK WORD STUDY – IN ENGLISH

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In this paper we shall study the Greek word "**porneia**". In Matthew's Gospel this is the word used by Jesus to define the sexual sin which He says is the only valid ground for divorce and freedom to remarry with a new partner.

This is a very important question. It is not simply an isolated theoretical discussion about the meaning of a Greek word.

It is about our understanding of the Gospel. It is about whether or not our hearts are hard. It is about Jesus' definition of the sin of adultery. It is about whether people who divorce and then remarry, can inherit the Kingdom of God.

It affects the nature of our dealings with people we know who, depending on what Jesus really meant, may be living in adultery.

In our time many modern Greek scholars tell us that according to the Greek lexicons, "porneia" is a broad word defining sexual sin of all kinds. This broad meaning is then applied to the specific case of divorce, using it to justify divorce AND REMARRIAGE on the ground of ADULTERY.

However, the same scholars also tell us that "porneia", does have other more restrictive meanings. This does leave the possibility open that, from amongst the several meanings available to them, they may have chosen the **wrong one** to apply to the "exceptional clause".

In fact there are other scholars who do argue that "porneia" is a much more specific word which does not include adultery.

The "experts" disagree amongst themselves!

How shall we who are not "experts" or scholars, decide between them?

THE BASIS OF THE STUDY

In this paper we shall use Greek and Hebrew words often.

However at the very beginning I confess that, like most of you, I can't read Hebrew. I do have a Hebrew lexicon, but it is no help. I don't even know the Hebrew alphabet.

Greek is not much better. I can read the alphabet and, with some effort, recognise a few words.

I know a small amount of Greek grammar just enough to be dangerous!

Those of you who share these limitations with me, will understand the need to find a way to conduct this study of Greek and Hebrew words without credentials in either Greek or Hebrew!

Because this paper is written for laymen, I will attempt to write it in such a way that any layman can duplicate the study for himself by using the same methods.

I will use only tools and sources readily available to other laymen.

I will not quote from Lexicons which most of us cannot read. Nor will I quote from the writings of the many conflicting "experts".

It would not help if I did. Most of what I think are the best books, are now out of print and not available for you, either to verify the sources for yourself, or make a rational assessment of their contents.

In any case both the Lexicons and the writings of the "experts" suffer from a common deficiency.

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God".
(Matthew 4:4)

Neither the Lexicons nor the many contradictory opinions found in the writings of the "experts" are words from the mouth of God!

They are not always wrong, but neither are they inspired or infallible.

They are as much open to theological bias and HARDNESS OF HEART about this subject as they are about others!

If we want to base our study on words which are certainly from the mouth of God, we have only one source.

We will have to read our Bibles! And we will have to pray!

Peter warns us ([2 Peter 1:20-21](#)), that understanding an inspired writing requires the same help from the Holy Spirit, as was given to the writers.

It is open for all of us to say our own prayers and read the Bible for ourselves. God invites us to believe that when we pray for wisdom, with hearts open to Him, we will NOT BE LEFT ALONE.

Any of us who know that we are amongst those foolish people described in [1 Corinthians 1:26-31](#), may ask God for wisdom. ([James 1:5-8](#)). We do not need to be scholars of ancient languages, for God to hear and answer our prayer generously, and without reproach.

To follow this method will prove to be time consuming. There are no short cuts. If we want to hear God's words on this subject, we will have to read them all.

To do this, I have used my Young's Analytical Concordance, which spells out the Greek and Hebrew words in English letters, to find and PRAYERFULLY read EVERY passage where the Concordance tells me the relevant words appear.

I have sought the promised work of the Holy Spirit to lead me into the truth and open my eyes to see clearly, in context, HOW GOD USES THE WORDS.

The conclusions I have reached are no better or worse than the degree to which my prayer has been heard and answered.

PLEASE DO NOT MERELY READ MY PAPER!

There is no such thing as "second hand" faith. For your own conclusions to become a matter of personal faith, you will need to read ALL those Scriptures yourself. You will need to say your own prayers in total honesty of heart, for God to open YOUR spiritual eyes and then write His truth, in your heart and mind.

And if you too discover what I have found, you may need to be prepared for unpopularity!

USING THE CONCORDANCE

The concordances, like the Lexicons, will offer several meanings for the words. We must be careful what we do with those several meanings.

We must avoid the pitfalls of searching out alternative meanings from the concordance and then simply changing the translation, just because it advances our cause.

We all know that we don't do that with an English dictionary when reading other books in our own language! Why should it be acceptable to do it with the Bible, in Greek or Hebrew?

What we are trying to do, first of all, is understand HOW God uses the words, in a book GIVEN TO US BY GOD.

Then we must find, prayerfully, the "*mind of Christ*", (1 Corinthians 2:11-16), to decide which of the several possible meanings is appropriate in the NARROW CONTEXT of the teaching of Jesus about divorce and remarriage.

DECIDING BETWEEN THE "EXPERTS"

Only a generation ago, there was little argument amongst laymen (at least in my acquaintance), about the meaning of "porneia". Indeed, most of us didn't even know the word existed! Nor did we expect that we would one day need to become amateur Greek scholars, to understand what Jesus was saying to us.

We didn't need to know! We all had our King James Bible with its English translation of the word as "fornication". And we ALL knew what that meant. The average man in the street still does know what that word means.

However, in the Church that has all changed now. We have even changed the word in some modern translations of the Bible, making it a little easier to justify the finding of new marriage partners.

That is not a small change at all and it presents us with a serious problem. We are confronted with a difference between "experts".

The earlier translators did their work against the background of centuries of history in which the Church stood firmly against divorce and remarriage.

The modern translators of those few versions in which the change appears, have done their work in an atmosphere infected by the bias of hard hearted churchmen who justify divorce and remarriage, not only for adultery, but also on all of the other grounds rejected by Jesus.

However it is not simply a matter of choosing between the ancient and the new.

Nor is it a matter of counting "expert" heads to settle the issue by a "democratic vote" and follow the majority opinion.

We must all hear from God for ourselves, what JESUS means by "porneia" in those two places where He uses it in the context of divorce.

For many the difference between those old and new "experts" will prove to be the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

At the Judgement each divorced and remarried individual will have to answer for his own personal choice of "experts".

Unrepentant adulterers of all kinds, and every meaning of the word, will be rejected from the Kingdom of God.

And some of the "experts" will also have to answer to God for their part in causing others to stumble into sin.

Is it just possible that a whole generation of the Church has been BEGUILED by the subtle logic of the Serpent, explaining away both what Jesus said about adultery, and the dreadful consequences of the sin? The Serpent does still say, "*you will not surely die!*"! [\(Genesis 3:4\)](#)

THE WORD STUDY - IN ENGLISH

Our word study begins with the English words "fornication" and "unchastity".

For good measure, we shall also add the words, "adultery", "harlot", "whore", and "prostitute".

"Fornication" is the word chosen by the translators of the King James Version and The Jerusalem Bible, as the most suitable rendition of the meaning of "porneia", in the two places where Jesus uses it to define the sole possible ground for divorce.

[\(Matthew 5:32 & Matthew 19:9\)](#)

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines "fornication" as "Voluntary sexual intercourse between a man (occasionally restricted to unmarried men) and an unmarried woman."

Note carefully that the marital status of the man is not the point at issue here. The important point is that the **woman** is ALWAYS unmarried.

"Unchastity" is the replacement word for "fornication", used in some newer versions of the Bible. These include the Revised Standard Version, New English Bible and New American Standard Bible. Other less known versions which use "unchastity" include Moffatt and Weymouth.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary gives the meaning of "unchastity" as the opposite of "chastity". i.e. the opposite of "continence, virginity, celibacy".

Following the dictionary a little further, a virgin is "a person, especially a woman, who has had no sexual intercourse".

A celibate is "a person not married, or of unmarried life and habits".

"Harlot" and "whore" both mean "prostitute".

"Prostitute" means "a woman who offers her body to indiscriminate sexual intercourse, especially for hire".

"Adultery" translates the Greek "moichea". According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary this English word means "Voluntary sexual intercourse of a married person with one of the opposite sex other than his or her spouse".

These dictionary meanings leave us in no doubt at all, about what the translators meant us to understand by "porneia" as the sole ground of divorce allowed by Jesus.

In the language that we all speak, they DID NOT chose other English words with a wider meaning including "all sorts of sexual sin", or more specifically, "adultery". Instead they chose words which clearly set "porneia" apart from "adultery", especially in the context of divorce.

They chose either "fornication" or "unchastity". When used about a woman, as they are in [Matthew 5:32](#) & [Matthew 19:9](#), these English words mean "sexual sin by an **unmarried** woman". When used about a married woman as a ground for divorce, as is also the case in these verses, they can only refer to sin committed BEFORE marriage.

It is only in recent times, as the Church has radically altered its position on divorce, that major new translations have accommodated this change by moving away from "fornication" and "unchastity" to "sexual immorality", (New King James), or as the New International Version has it, "marital unfaithfulness".

THE WORD STUDY - IN HEBREW

When I set out to study the meaning of "porneia" I quickly came to the conclusion that I was studying the wrong word! (and in the wrong language!)

Jesus did not speak the original words about divorce in Greek! Instead, He spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic.

Jesus did not say "except for **porneia**". Rather, He most likely said "except for *taznuth*".

To arrive at His meaning we will do well to study this Old Testament Hebrew noun which Jesus must have used. We will also need to study the parallel verb "zana" and two other associated words, "zenuth" and "zenunim".

I found that these words have ONLY ONE BASIC MEANING but are used in THREE SEPARATE WAYS. They are not all inclusive words defining sexual sin in general. They define one specific sexual sin in three different settings. It is the context which defines which way the word is to be understood.

In virtually every place where these words occur, their **fundamental** meaning is to do with "prostitution", "harlotry", "whoredom".

They NEVER mean anything else.

The three settings in which they are used are discussed below.

1. PROSTITUTION

In this setting the words are used with their fundamental meaning. They describe the sin of a woman who prostitutes herself by selling her body to a man who is not her husband. Examples of their use this way are found in [Leviticus 21:13-14](#) and [Deuteronomy 23:18](#).

2. FORNICATION

In English we have separate words to distinguish between fornication and harlotry.

Unlike English, there does not appear to be a separate Hebrew word to distinguish between these two sins. In Hebrew they are the same thing. In God's view of the matter, a man who seduces a girl is treating her like a harlot. An unmarried girl who allows herself to be seduced has earned the name and reputation of a harlot.

"Zana" is used this way, describing the sin of an unmarried woman, in [Deuteronomy 22:21](#).

3. IDOLATRY

By far the major use of these words is in reference to the sin of idolatry.

In many places the spiritual condition of idolatrous Israel and Judah is described as whoredom.

Examples of their use in this way occur in [Exodus 34:15-16](#) & [Leviticus 20:5](#).

Harlotry is certainly a fitting description of particular forms of idolatry, which appears, in many cases, to include temple prostitution.

However, the words, in themselves, DO NOT MEAN IDOLATRY.

When they appear in this setting, they are used to describe the defilement of the SPIRITUAL relationship between God and His people.

This results, not from idolatry alone, but from the **many different** sins tolerated and practised amongst an apostate people, who have turned away to the worship of other gods.

DOES WHOREDOM IN THE HEBREW, INCLUDE ADULTERY?

In a few places (principally in the writings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea) an adulteress is called a harlot.

Sometimes both words are used together. In these cases harlotry is also used in the context of divorce.

When a married woman becomes a harlot, it is inescapable that she also commits adultery two sins, with TWO DIFFERENT NAMES, in the one act.

These passages are not teaching us that the Hebrew words for harlotry, adultery and idolatry, mean the same thing, or are interchangeable in every place where they appear.

In fact, in [Hosea 4:13-14](#), Hosea uses both harlotry and adultery together, in a way that clearly shows the NORMAL difference between these two words :

- * Harlotry is the ONLY name for the sexual sin of (unmarried) daughters.
- * Adultery is the NORMAL name for the sexual sin of married women.
- * Idolatry is not necessarily about sexual sin at all. It ought to be clear that, the prophets are not really speaking about divorce and certainly not about remarriage after divorce! Rather, they are conveying a SPIRITUAL lesson about the consequences of backslidden Israel's NATIONAL sin of IDOLATRY.

And, as we shall see below, it is not appropriate at all to transfer that spiritual lesson to the realm of human marriage, in order to take licence to find a new marriage partner.

The spiritual lesson is about the **magnitude** of the sin and the **consequences** of the sin. This is a NATIONAL sin with NATIONAL consequences.

Israel's "adultery" is no ordinary adultery. It needs a bigger word than "adultery" to describe God's view of her spiritual condition.

Israel is likened to a woman who has deserted her husband to become a harlot. The woman used to describe Israel's condition, knows no shame. She is insatiable. She is a harlot who has given herself to many lovers, without payment. Rather than seeking payment, she has actually paid some of the many lovers she has taken.

The SPIRITUAL LESSON behind the graphic word pictures of harlotry, is that Israel is DEFILED AND SEPARATED FROM GOD by idolatry, in exactly the same way that a woman who wilfully plays the harlot, **without repentance**, is defiled and separated from an angry husband.

The prophets have described a "worst possible case". The situation between God and Israel is so bad that, in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, GOD HAS DIVORCED HIS HARLOT WIFE! The NATION has been sent into exile for its persistent unrepentant IDOLATRY.

It is certainly true that, even for Christians, unrepented harlotry of this magnitude would lead to estrangement and separation. However, as we shall see below, even in this worst possible case, the prophets are not uniform about whether God has issued an actual bill of divorce.

And it would be HARDNESS OF HEART, in the extreme, to use this spiritual lesson to grant a LICENCE FOR REMARRIAGE on the grounds of either idolatry or adultery.

It is quite obvious from the context of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, that God still regards Himself as bound by His "marriage covenant" with Israel. God is not using His "divorce" as an occasion to seek a new wife. Rather, He is inviting the harlot to repent and return to Him. The door is open for that and will never close, while life grants opportunity.

In Isaiah, it is not even certain that the bill of divorce exists. However it is not important that we resolve the question of whether or not there has been a formal "divorce". Either way the lesson is the same. The "wife" who has been sent away for her iniquities is neither forgotten nor forsaken. Zion will be restored to favour.

Hosea goes even further with the lesson of God's faithfulness. When faced with his own decision about what to do with a wife who has become a harlot, Hosea DOES NOT DIVORCE HER. Rather, at considerable personal cost, he actually buys her back from the brothel where she has become a slave.

This, Hosea says, is how God also will deal with His faithless "wife".

With one united voice, the prophets are saying what the Apostle Paul also said, centuries later:

GOD WILL REMAIN UNMARRIED OR ELSE BE RECONCILED!

How is it possible that men would dare to distort or misuse these beautiful lessons to encourage or condone a lesser standard for human marriage?

If there is any lesson at all to be learned from the prophets about human divorce and remarriage, it is that, even for the worst sort of hurt, even in the worst possible case of ADULTERY, God expects US also to keep covenant with the same unchangeable and sacrificial love which He extends to His "wife".

That is the nature of the covenant keeping which is one of the qualifications for life with God on the holy mountain. ([Psalm 15:4](#) *"he who swears to his own hurt and does not change".*)

When we say our marriage vows before God, we make a sacred promise, "for better, for worse, until death do us part". Those words contain no exceptions and leave no room for change.

Let those whose hearts have been hard about this, turn towards God, listen and learn!

THE WORD STUDY - IN GREEK

"porneia" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew words discussed above.

It appears to be used in all the same ways as its Hebrew equivalent, including "spiritual fornication".

1. PROSTITUTION

Like its Hebrew equivalent, this is the fundamental meaning of the word.

It describes the sin of a woman who prostitutes herself by giving her body to a man who is not her husband, in return for money. It also defines the sin of the man who buys her favours.

An example of this use of the word is found in [1 Corinthians 6:13-20](#).

2. FORNICATION

Greek, like Hebrew, does not appear to have separate words to distinguish between fornication and prostitution. This lack of distinction between the two does fit well with the Hebrew view.

An unmarried girl who commits fornication is behaving like a harlot, and the man who seduces her is using her as a harlot.

“Porneia” is used in this way, describing the sin of unmarried persons, in [1 Corinthians 7:2](#) & [John 8:41](#) & [1 Thessalonians 4:3](#).

3. SPIRITUAL FORNICATION

In [Revelation chapters 17 & 18](#) the Apostle John uses the word in the same way as the Old testament prophets, to describe an apostate church.

However in John's prophecy, the word is not quite so much about idolatry, (although that is certainly ONE of the problems of apostate Catholicism).

Instead, John concentrates more on the apostate church's faithless political alliances with the kings of the earth, which he says will earn the same certain judgement as REAL harlotry.

Another difference in John's word picture, compared with the Old Testament, is that he nowhere describes the harlot church of [Revelation chapters 17 & 18](#), as a DIVORCED WIFE.

DOES “porneia” INCLUDE ADULTERY?

In Greek "adultery" is the word "**moicheia**". It has the same NORMAL distinction from "porneia" as our English word "adultery" does from "fornication" or "prostitution".

It is frequently claimed that in several places in the New Testament, “porneia” is used in a way that includes "sexual sin in general", and "adultery in particular".

There are certainly a number of verses where “porneia” occurs, where it plainly does NOT include adultery. These references include:

- * The words of Jesus Himself, in [Matthew 15:19](#) and [Mark 7:21](#), where BOTH "fornication" and "adultery" are used in the same sentence, showing exactly the difference between the two sins that we normally understand.
- * The words of Paul, in [1 Corinthians 6:9](#) & [Hebrews 13:4](#), where the Apostle makes the same distinction.

These verses are very positive in defining the NORMAL distinction between the two words. This should, at the very least, make us ask whether “porneia” is ever used in any other way which loses that distinction.

One of the verses regularly used to claim a wider general meaning for the word is [Galatians 5:19-21](#), where Paul lists the works of the flesh which will prevent inheritance of the Kingdom of God. At the top of the list is "porneia".

It is often claimed that the meaning of "porneia" in this passage extends to include all the other sexual sins not specifically listed. It is then claimed that this justifies the conclusion that "porneia" means "sexual sin in general" and includes "adultery".

However, it is worth noting that the King James version does list adultery and fornication separately in this passage. (and the concordance tells me that in fact, both words are included in the older version of the Greek text from which this translation is made).

This certainly implies that the compilers of that older Greek text and the translators of the KJV did NOT understand "porneia" to include adultery, at least in this passage.

The conclusion that the meaning of "porneia" must include all the other sexual sins omitted from the list, is really a rather short sighted and hard hearted ABUSE OF THE GREEK (AND ENGLISH) LANGUAGE!

That list is clearly incomplete with respect to many other NON SEXUAL sins.

It is just as clear that none of these are included in the literal meaning of the Greek words for ANY OF THE OTHER SINS NAMED.

However, there is one phrase in the verse which does include ALL of those other unlisted sins. They appear under the general term, "AND SUCH LIKE"!

That phrase means ET CETERA!

It is much more reasonable and correct to include all the other sexual sins under that "et cetera", than to bend the Greek in a desperate attempt to annex them under "fornication"!

This is how we must also view the meaning of "porneia" when it appears in other lists, such as in [1 Corinthians 6:9-10](#) & [Colossians 3:5](#).

These are NOT lists which name every possible sin!

They are **incomplete** lists in which "porneia" is TYPICAL of a range of other sexual sins.

The use of "porneia" does not mean that those sins are included in the specific meaning of the word itself. We are meant to understand that "ET CETERA" is IMPLIED, just as certainly as it is actually written in [Galatians 5:21](#).

There remains one other New Testament reference, where "porneia" is often treated with similar carelessness to claim that it includes "adultery", or perhaps "incest", in its meaning. That is the case in Corinth, of the man who was living with his father's wife.

([1 Corinthians 5:1](#)).

However on closer inspection we find that there are several unanswered speculative questions about this case.

Firstly, Paul says, this is a unique and rare kind of "porneia" seldom found even amongst pagans. This certainly suggests caution about using this case to determine the NORMAL meaning of the word.

Secondly, Paul's careful identification of the woman as "his father's wife" implies that she is, almost certainly, not the man's own mother, but his step-mother. In view of Paul's

emphasis of the other repugnant aspects of this case it hardly seems likely that he would not also clearly say "mother", if this was true. (See [Leviticus 18:7-8.](#))

Thirdly, we should consider the possibility that perhaps the man's father was dead.

All three of these factors might affect Paul's usually careful choice of words. If the man's father was dead, and if it was the man's stepmother, then "adultery" would NOT be the appropriate word, (as it would seem to be if the father was still alive). Rather, the use of "fornication" (between unmarried persons), might be a much more accurate choice.

However, there is simply not enough information for us to speculate further on Paul's choice of words. We merely raise sufficient doubt about the situation, to discount its reliability in determining that the NORMAL meaning of "porneia" might include "adultery" or "incest", **ESPECIALLY AS A GROUND FOR DIVORCE.**

ARE THERE ANY BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF A REAL DIVORCE FOR HARLOTRY?

1. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT - FOR "TAZNUTH" or "ZANAH"

In the whole of the Old Testament, while there are a number of references which acknowledge the fact of divorce, there are only two clear cases of REAL divorce.

These are the cases described in [Ezra chapter 10](#) and [Nehemiah chapter 13](#). These cases are also referred to by the prophet Malachi.

There were three problems with the marriages concerned:

- * the wives were certainly guilty of "spiritual **porneia**" idolatry. Malachi tells us that they were "*the daughters of a foreign god*". ([Malachi 2:11](#)). Perhaps these husbands were also involved in idolatry. This would not be the first case of husbands being drawn into this sin by foreign wives. e.g. Solomon.
- * The marriages were illegal according to the law of Moses. The wives were not Jews. God's name for such unions between previously unmarried parties would be "fornication". (or " *taznuth* " or "porneia"!)
- * At least some of the marriages were adulterous.

Some of the men involved had broken covenant with their first wives and divorced them, to enter these marriages. ([Malachi 2:14- 16](#)). God did not recognise these divorces any more than He did the second marriages!

These "marriages" were not marriages at all. Since they were illegal and involved either harlotry or adultery, they could never be said to have been JOINED BY GOD.

Malachi calls the marriages an abomination which profaned the sanctuary of the Lord. ([Malachi 2:11](#))

On all counts, they needed to be undone, in repentance.

There is one other Old Testament case where an INVALID DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE was undone!

That is the case of David and Michal.

Saul had taken David's wife and given her to Palti. When David came to the throne, one of His first actions was to have her taken from her second husband and returned to him. Thus did he rescue her from adultery. Her second marriage was invalid because her divorce was also invalid in God's sight.

2. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT - FOR "porneia"

In the New Testament, there is no example of a completed divorce at all.

However, there is one which NEARLY happened. It should be no surprise to discover that in this case, the ground was (or would have been) "porneia".

Dare we suggest that in the only Gospel to contain the "exceptional clause", the Holy Spirit has also given us the only example of divorce which would allow us to understand what the exception means?

The example is, of course, the case of Joseph and Mary.

At the time where Joseph mistakenly thought Mary to be guilty of "porneia" their marriage had NOT BEEN JOINED BY GOD. They were betrothed, but not yet married. According to Jewish custom a betrothal required the same bill of divorce to undo it, as did a marriage.

This case is the only clear New Testament EXAMPLE of what Jesus might have meant by "porneia" as a valid ground for divorce, and, if Joseph had not been mistaken, then on two counts, it would have been a separation of a couple who God HAD NOT JOINED!

- * Firstly, the marriage had not yet been finalised or consummated.
- * Secondly, had it been true that Mary had committed fornication, then in God's sight, she would already have belonged to another man.

Even if we conclude that "porneia" does have a wider meaning, there is certainly no case history at all, anywhere in Scripture, which would justify that wider meaning as an all-inclusive ground for REMARRIAGE after a divorce. To go beyond the boundaries of the examples quoted, to extend the meaning of "porneia" to adultery, in the context of divorce, is to argue from silence.

THE EFFECT OF THE TEACHING OF JESUS ABOUT MARRIAGE, ON THE MEANING OF "porneia"

To reach a satisfactory conclusion about the meaning of "porneia" we must do more than study English, Greek and Hebrew words. We must lay our foundation, not in the subject of divorce, but in what Jesus said about marriage.

Divorce is about breaking marriage contracts. "porneia" is the one valid ground for breaking a marriage contract.

When we reach a clear understanding of what Jesus taught about MARRIAGE, it will limit our understanding of "porneia" in the specific context of His teaching about divorce.

Jesus was direct and simple about this subject. If we will hear this clearly, it will answer ALL our other questions!

"What God has joined together, let not man separate". (Matthew 19:6).

This is exactly what our marriage vows said, "..... for better, for worse, until death do us part".

This is THE FOUNDATION which conditions our ultimate understanding of the meaning of "porneia".

Once a marriage has been joined by God, the two are no longer two, but ONE, until separated by death, (which is a separation remaining as much in God's hands as the joining.)

What is it then that men may separate? Is there a marriage that God HAS NOT JOINED?

The answer is certainly yes. Just as certainly as there are manmade divorces which God does not recognise, there are also marriages joined by men, which God has not joined.

This concept is preserved in wording of the traditional Marriage Services still used by many churches.

"Be assured that those who are joined other than God's word allows, are not joined together by God. Neither is their matrimony lawful "

Properly understood, this will limit our definition of "porneia".

"Porneia" is about the separation of what God has NOT JOINED.

Since adultery takes place AFTER GOD HAS JOINED A MARRIAGE, it is excluded as a cause for a divorce which grants licence for a second marriage.

Men MAY NOT SEPARATE WHAT GOD HAS JOINED.

God has a far different and much more sacrificial answer for those who have taken vows, "until death do us part".

AWKWARD QUESTIONS ABOUT THE MEANING OF "porneia"

For those who do want to insist that "porneia" means "adultery", in the context of divorce, there are some awkward questions to be answered.

Why is it that most people say that it has a broader meaning, and then take only one narrow part of that meaning, namely "adultery", as THE GROUND for divorce?

Why do we not include all of the other ways in which the word is used, as valid grounds for divorce and remarriage?

For instance, in the New Testament, "porneia" is also used to describe the same sort of SPIRITUAL fornication for which the prophets say God divorced His "wife".

If we use the word as the prophets do, and as the Apostle John does, why should we not include idolatry, or mixing politics with Christianity, (committing fornication with the Kings of the earth), as a ground for divorce? (We might even use Malachi to support our cause!)

If we do include idolatry, what sort of idol do we mean?

Is it to be restricted to the religious idolatry of paganism or Catholicism?

Or should we also allow it to include covetousness? ([Colossians 3:5](#))

Further, if in the context of divorce "porneia" does mean "adultery", what is our definition of adultery? Shall we confine our definition to the deed itself?

Or, since it is Jesus who is using the word, must we not also include the secret lustful fantasies of the mind, which he includes in HIS definition of adultery? How many marriages would survive if we did open THAT door to the hard hearted?

If we do reject idolatry and covetousness and sexual fantasy, why should we not also reject other meanings of the word?

The answer to all of those awkward questions is twofold.

Firstly, the NORMAL meaning of "porneia" does not include "adultery". The Greeks had a separate word for that.

Secondly there is ONLY ONE of the several possible meanings of "**porneia**" which would meet the PRIMARY REQUIREMENT OF NOT SEPARATING WHAT GOD HAS JOINED.

CONCLUSION

The Hebrew "*taznuth*" and the Greek "*porneia*" do have several meanings.

However, not ALL of them apply in every place where the word appears! That is especially true in the context of the teaching of Jesus about divorce. In that context the meaning of "*porneia*", must be limited by our understanding of what Jesus says about MARRIAGE. From the several meanings offered as possibilities, we must choose a meaning that addresses the following issues:

- * What did Jesus mean when he said, "*what God has joined, let not man separate*"?
- * Are there any possible grounds to break the sacred promise, MADE TO GOD, when we made our marriage vows, "for better, for worse, until death do us part"?
- * Can there be a marriage which GOD HAS NOT JOINED, which men may separate?
- * If there is such a marriage, what sexual sin allows it to be undone?

Regardless of what "*porneia*" MIGHT OR MIGHT NOT MEAN in other contexts, its meaning in this narrow context of divorce, must refer to a case WHICH DOES NOT SEPARATE WHAT GOD HAS JOINED.

That brings us back to the case of Joseph and Mary, as the sole New Testament example of what Jesus meant, when He said, "*except for porneia*".

In the NARROW CONTEXT OF DIVORCE, sexual sin by an unmarried girl, is the ONLY meaning for "**porneia**" which is acceptable.

POSTSCRIPT

Amongst those whose hearts are not hard, that conclusion is meant to be treated with great discretion.

In our western culture, the circumstances in which a divorce might be valid on the ground of "fornication" are extremely rare.

The "exceptional clause" DOES NOT automatically open the door, either to cancel a betrothal, or to insist on the "right" to divorce, in EVERY case where fornication is discovered during the betrothal period, or in the early days of a marriage.

Nor does it seem at all reasonable to suggest that it could ever justify divorce several years and several children later!

Especially in a Christian setting, the possibility of past sinful relationships should be canvassed during pre-marriage counselling, long BEFORE the marriage vows are said. In a situation where there is something to confess, this is the time to encourage any necessary honesty, forgiveness, and reconciliation. When the past has been forgiven, "from the heart", ([Matthew 18:35](#)) it can never again become a ground for divorce.

In cases where there has been dishonesty, and fornication has not been discovered until after the marriage has been entered, the Christian goal is not separation, but reconciliation
