

EXCEPT FOR FORNICATION

By Allon Maxwell

When Jesus said, "*except for fornication*", (in [Matthew 5:32](#)), the Greek text has the words, "**logou porneias**". This phrase could be translated literally, as something like "a word of harlotry".

There is a remarkable similarity to the Hebrew phrase, "*dabar ervah*", used by Moses in [Deuteronomy 24:1](#), (*"some indecency"* in the R.S.V). Translated literally, this phrase becomes "a word of nakedness".

It is hardly likely that this similarity is mere coincidence. This teaching was first given to Disciples, ([Matthew 5:1](#)), and Pharisees, ([Matthew 19:3](#)), who were very familiar with the words of Moses. They would have recognised the inference immediately.

However, although the subject of both phrases is the ground for divorce, and their form is so similar, there is a very important difference between them.

"Porneia", in Greek, is NOT a direct equivalent for the Hebrew word for "nakedness". Instead it is the translation of "*taznuth*", which is the word most likely used by Jesus.

It seems certain that Jesus has deliberately changed the word!

The word "nakedness" had been much discussed and much abused by the hard hearted Pharisees.

For the narrowest school, it was claimed to mean only "adultery".

Others extended the meaning to include almost anything in the realm of sexual sin. To justify this they pointed to the use of "nakedness" in [Leviticus 18](#), where it refers to a number of forbidden sexual relationships.

For the really determined, it could be made to mean virtually anything at all. Even the most trivial causes were accepted by men with hard hearts and elastic consciences, seeking an excuse to abandon one wife in order to take another.

This pointed CHANGE from "nakedness" to "harlotry", is very significant.

Jesus is using a play on words to tell both Pharisees, and Disciples, what God really intended men to understand about "nakedness" as a cause for divorce IF OUR HEARTS ARE NOT HARD!

For all whose tender hearts will receive His teaching about divorce, Jesus has chosen a much more specific and clearly limiting word, than the one used by Moses.

In choosing THIS word, Jesus has carefully rejected the possibility of divorce for **almost all** sexual sins, and **absolutely all** other causes, read into "nakedness" by the hard hearted.

"*Taznuth*" is the word which we must use to help us understand the meaning of the Greek New Testament "Porneia", not everywhere it is found, but in the narrow context of divorce.

This is important. We must not do this back to front, using "porneia" to define "*taznuth*". That borders on "circular logic".

In Scripture, "*taznuth*" is used several ways but has ONLY ONE meaning:-

- * The fundamental meaning is to do with prostitution in general. - Unlike English, Hebrew does not have a separate word for fornication. "*Taznuth*" also describes the "prostitution" of unmarried girls who commit fornication.
- * In a different setting altogether, it is used to describe the sin of idolatry as "spiritual prostitution".

In the New Testament "porneia" is used in all the same ways as "*taznuth*". We must now decide just how much of the meaning of "*taznuth*" (and then "porneia" as qualified by "*taznuth*"), is appropriate, IN THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT OF DIVORCE. We must select from the several possible meanings, only what does not lead to conflict with what Jesus also said about marriage.

With THAT CONSTRAINT, the only possible meaning is "fornication", the sexual sin of an unmarried girl with a partner other than the man she is about to marry, (or perhaps has married already, in deception).

Confirmation of that meaning is found in the sole New Testament case history of a divorce.

That case history is the story of Joseph and Mary, where of course we know that the divorce did not actually take place. However the ground on which it was proposed, was Joseph's mistaken belief that Mary was guilty of "porneia", and carrying another man's child, as a result.

The gossip about it persisted and the Pharisees later used the rumoured "scandal" about His birth as the result of "porneia", as an excuse to reject Him. ([John 8:41](#)).

One meaning which we must certainly reject, in the context of divorce, is "adultery", even if it is claimed by some as a possible meaning of "porneia". (And I believe that we should have the deepest reservation about the validity of THAT claim anyway.)

In [Matthew 19:3-9](#), which is the only other place where Jesus mentions the "exceptional clause", He has also said very clearly that men MAY NOT undo what God has joined.

Adultery is sexual sin which takes place AFTER a marriage has been joined by God. Therefore it cannot possibly be included in what Jesus means by the exception.

When this is clearly seen, the ground of "fornication" alone fits with God's basic definition of marriage, dating back to Eden.

ANY other ground which PRESUMPTUOUSLY claims licence **for men** to undo what God has joined, is not admissible.

If men MAY NOT separate what God has joined, then it follows logically that the only "marriage" which they MAY separate is one that God has NOT JOINED.

FORNICATION, discovered during the betrothal period, or just perhaps, in the early days after marriage, is the only possible sexual sin which might be cause for such a separation.

Let us hasten to add that although this permission for divorce might apply to some situations involving fornication, IT IS CERTAINLY NOT AN AUTOMATIC "RIGHT" FOR ALL CASES.

Let us also add that several years and several children after marriage, does NOT seem a reasonable time at all for this to become the ground for divorce!

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into discussion of all the hard theoretical questions about WHEN it might be, and when it might not be, acceptable to divorce for fornication.

However, before concluding, it must be emphasised that, between Christians, the circumstances in which such a divorce might be valid, must certainly prove to be extremely rare.

If fornication is discovered, confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation are the primary goals, NOT SEPARATION.

"If you do not forgive others, then the wrongs that you have done will not be forgiven by your Father". (Matthew 6:14 NEB).

For a more comprehensive study of the meanings of "fornication, "taznuth", and "porneia", see Bible Digest Number 39