An Alternative View Of Jesus’ Divorce Teachings
Daniel R. Jennings

Matthew 19:9 is commonly regarded as the main teaching verse of Jesus on the issue of divorce and remarriage. As it reads in most modern translations it is understood to teach that upon discovery of adulterous behavior, the innocent spouse may divorce and remarry.

**I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery. Mt 19:9NIV2011**

Because it seems to offer an exception to Jesus total prohibition of remarriage after a divorce elsewhere (Mk 10:11-12, Lk 16:18, 1Co 7:10-11, 39) it is referred to as the “exception clause”.

Although this appears to be the most popular interpretation amongst Evangelicals there is a growing movement within Evangelical Christianity that is opting for an alternative interpretation. This alternative view is sometimes referred to as the “Fornication View” and it is the purpose of this paper to evaluate the evidence that this view is based upon.

**Brief Explanation Of The Fornication View**

At the root of the “Fornication View” is the quest for the best way to translate one word in Matthew 19:9, the underlying Greek word that is translated as “sexual immorality” in the NIV2011. That word is *porneia* and proponents of the Fornication View maintain that it is more correct to translate it as referring to pre-nuptial sexual sin (fornication) in this passage. Thus, whereas the other view understands this passage to reflect something which happens after the wedding, the Fornication View believes it to be referring to something which happens before the marriage ceremony that invalidates the wedding (the age old scenario of a man who marries a woman believing her to be a virgin only to find out after the wedding that she was a fornicator). This method of translating the passage is found in numerous translations such as the 1901 American Standard Version which reads:

**And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery:**

Because both views are presented in major Bible translations the only way for a
student of the Scriptures to conclude which one is correct is to examine the evidence.

The Evidence In Favor Of The Fornication View

I. Pre-New Testament Greek writers such as Aeschines (389-314BC),\(^1\) Demosthenes (384–322BC),\(^2\) Herodotus (c.484–c.425BC),\(^3\) the Septuagint (300-200BC),\(^4\) the Apocrypha\(^5\) and Strabo (c.63BC-c.24AD)\(^6\) use the \textit{porneia} family of words to describe the pre-marital sexual behavior of single individuals.

II. The New Testament writers Matthew, Mark, Paul and the author of Hebrews all use the \textit{porneia} family of words alongside of the \textit{moichaeo} family of words (the undisputed Greek word family for adultery) in lists of sins, implying that it meant something other than adultery:

For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, \textbf{adulteries} (\textit{moicheia}), \textbf{fornications} (\textit{porneia}), thefts, false witness, blasphemies… Mt 15:19

For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, \textbf{adulteries} (\textit{moicheia}), \textbf{fornications} (\textit{porneia}), murders… Mk 7:21

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; \textbf{Adultery} (\textit{moicheia}), \textbf{fornication} (\textit{porneia}), uncleanness, lasciviousness… Ga 5:19

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither \textbf{fornicators} (\textit{pornos}), nor idolaters, nor \textbf{adulterers} (\textit{moichos}), nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind… 1Co 6:9

Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled: but \textbf{fornicators} (\textit{pornos}) and \textbf{adulterers} (\textit{moichos}) God will judge. He 13:4NKJV

III. There are over sixty post-New Testament examples from Greek literature in which the \textit{porneia} family of words is distinguished from the Greek word family for adultery (\textit{moichaeo}) as if it was understood to be a completely different kind of sin.\(^7\) For examples consider:

\textbf{Justin Martyr}: “For [God] sets before every race of mankind that which is always and universally just, as well as all righteousness; and every race knows that \textbf{adultery} (\textit{moicheia}), and \textbf{fornication} (\textit{porneia}), and homicide, and such like, are sinful…” (Dialogue With Trypho, Ch 93/ PG 6:697)
Theophilus: “And they also taught us to refrain from unlawful idolatry, and 
adultery (moicheia), and murder, fornication (porneia), theft, avarice, false 
swearing, wrath, and every incontinence and uncleanness…” (To Autolycus, 2:34/
PG 6:1108)

Gregory Of Nyssa: “Of those who fall into sin through desire and pleasure, this 
is the division: the one is called adultery (moicheia) and the other fornication 
(porneia)...Fornication (porneia) therefore is shown to be not far from the offence 
of adultery (moicheia) by those who look more accurately into its character, for 
the divine Scripture says, do not be intimate with the stranger. But since there has 
been some indulgence by the Fathers towards the weaker, the offence is therefore 
judged according to the generic division, with the result that any satisfaction of 
desire which occurs without injury to someone else is reckoned as fornication 
(porneia), whereas adultery (moicheia) is a plot and an injury against another.”
(Canonical Epistle To Letoius, Bishop Of Melitene, Canon 4a, d/ PG 45:228)

IV. Translating Matthew 19:9 to refer to post-marital adultery as an exception to Jesus’ 
stricter divorce and remarriage teachings causes it to contradict Luke 16:18 which 
describes a situation where a husband is said to have “committed adultery” and his 
abandoned wife is told that she cannot remarry:

**Whoever puts away his wife, and marries another, commits adultery 
and whoever marries her that is put away from her husband commits 
adultery. Lk 16:18**

Note that the innocent wife in the above verse is told that she cannot remarry, 
even though her husband has divorced her and committed adultery with someone else. If 
Matthew 19:9 teaches that adultery allows a person to divorce and remarry why is this 
woman whose husband committed adultery forbidden from remarrying?

V. Ten out of the eleven major English translations before World War II translated this 
passage to reflect the Fornication View:

**Wycliffe Bible (c.1380):** “...but for fornyacioun...”
**Tyndale New Testament (1525):** “...(except it be for fornicacion)...
**Coverdale’s Bible (1535):** “...(excepte it be for fornicacion)...
**Matthew’s Bible (1537):** “...(except it be for fornicacion)...
**The Great Bible (1539):** “...(except it be for fornicacion)...
**Bishop’s Bible (1568):** “...except it be for fornication...”
The only exception is the Geneva Bible which was created to promote the theology of John Calvin, who himself believed that the passage was referring to adultery.\(^1\)

Dictionaries and literature from the time period of the above translations demonstrates that the term “fornication” was commonly understood to refer to pre-marital sexual relations.

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<th>14th Century</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wycliffe Bible</td>
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<td>“…but for fornyacioun...”</td>
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<td>and of þis syn comyþ many sere spicys.              &gt;</td>
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\(^1\) The Geneva Bible (1557) translated it as “...(except it be for whoredome)...”. Strangely, the Geneva Bible translators translated the same Greek word as “fornication” in Matthew 5:32. For those who doubt that the Geneva Bible was created to promote the theology of Calvin I include the following quotes:

**F.F. Bruce:** “The notes of the Geneva Bible are famous, largely because they irritated James I so much; yet they are mild in comparison with Tyndale's. They are, to be sure, unashamedly Calvinistic in doctrine, and therefore offensive to readers who find Calvinism offensive...” (*History Of The Bible In English*, p.90)

**Henry William Hamilton-Hoare:** “Such, then, was the famous Genevan Bible...Considered as a literary whole it has about it the character of a Calvinist manifesto.” (*The Evolution Of The English Bible*, p.222-223)

**John Clover Monsma:** "The Geneva Bible also was extremely popular...This Bible, with its marginal notes, brought Calvinism into every Protestant home in England." (*What Calvinism Has Done For America, Vol. 1*, p.40)

**Gerald Bray:** "The Geneva Bible was famous, or notorious, for its Calvinist theology..." (*Documents Of The English Reformation*, p.355)
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<td><strong>Thomas Blount’s</strong></td>
<td><em>Gloffographia Anglicana</em> (1656): <em>Fornication</em>: Whoredom, Leachery, spoken of single persons, if either party be married then tis *Adultery.*¹²</td>
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VI. All in all, there are at least sixty translations of the New Testament which chose to employ the term “fornication”, mostly produced before the 1960’s. The choice of major English translations to reject the pre-marital view of translating Matthew 19:9 began in the 1960’s when the United States was experiencing a surge in divorces that were occurring for post-marital reasons.

VIII. Numerous Greek dictionaries from before the time that major English translations...
started translating this passage to reflect post-marital adultery list “fornication” as an acceptable translation of *porneia* but do not include “adultery”.\(^{19}\)

**IX.** Translating *porneia* in Matthew 19:9 to reflect pre-marital unchastity discovered after the wedding that invalidates the marriage causes it to match Deuteronomy 22:13-21 in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) which uses the *porneia* family of words to describe this same kind of situation:

> “And if any one should take a wife, and dwell with her, and hate her, and attach to her reproachful words, and bring against her an evil name, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her I **found not her tokens of virginity:** then the father and the mother of the damsel shall take and bring out the damsel’s tokens of virginity to the elders of the city to the gate...But if this report be true, **and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel:** then shall they bring out the damsel to the doors of her father’s house, and shall stone her with stones, and she shall die; because she has wrought folly among the children of Israel, to defile the house of her father by **whoring** (*ek-porneuo*): so thou shalt remove the evil one from among you.” (Dt 22:13-21Brenton)

It should be noted that in the Greek translation of Exodus 20:14 where it states “Thou shalt not commit adultery”, the Greek word for adultery is *moicheuo* (one of the undisputed Greek words for adultery). If Jesus was trying to tell his listeners that adultery justified individuals in divorcing and remarrying why did He use the Greek word from a passage referring to pre-marital sex instead of the Greek word from the passage “Thou shalt not commit adultery”?

**X.** A 2\(^{nd}\) century commentary on Jesus’ divorce teachings by a Christian named Athenagoras connects the passage to virginity, not adultery, implying that that is how the Christians of his day interpreted it:

> For we bestow our attention; not on the study of words, but on the exhibition and teaching of actions, — that a person should either remain as he was born, or **be content with one marriage:** for a second marriage is only a specious adultery. “For whoever puts away his wife,” says He, “and marries another, commits adultery;” **not permitting a man to send her away whose virginity he has brought to an end**, nor to marry again.\(^{20}\)

**XI.** Understanding Matthew 19:9 to be saying that only pre-marital sex invalidates the wedding carries with it the logical conclusion that a marriage in which the husband
takes his wife’s virginity cannot be dissolved. This interpretation causes Jesus’ teaching on divorce to match with that of the Law of Moses which also taught that a man who took a woman’s virginity could never divorce her.

If a man finds a young woman who is a virgin, who is not betrothed, and he seizes her and lies with her, and they are found out, then the man who lay with her shall give to the young woman’s father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife because he has humbled her; **he shall not be permitted to divorce her all his days.** Dt 22:28-29NKJV

If any man takes a wife, and goes in to her, and detests her, and charges her with shameful conduct, and brings a bad name on her, and says, ‘I took this woman, and when I came to her I found she was not a virgin,’ then the father and mother of the young woman shall take and bring out the evidence of the young woman’s virginity to the elders of the city at the gate. And the young woman’s father shall say to the elders, ‘I gave my daughter to this man as wife, and he detests her. Now he has charged her with shameful conduct, saying, “I found your daughter was not a virgin,” and yet these are the evidences of my daughter’s virginity.’ And they shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city. Then the elders of that city shall take that man and punish him; and they shall fine him one hundred shekels of silver and give them to the father of the young woman, because he has brought a bad name on a virgin of Israel. And she shall be his wife; **he cannot divorce her all his days.** Dt 22:13-19NKJV

These two passages indicate that only death dissolves a marriage in which the husband takes his wife’s virginity. In the first instance the man clearly takes the woman’s virginity and is told that he must marry her with no option of ever divorcing her as long as she lives. In the second instance a man attempts to portray his wife as having entered into the marriage with a concealed pre-marital sex experience. When it is discovered that this was not true and that it was her husband who had taken her virginity he is told that he can never divorce her.

Realizing that Jesus was referring to this Old Testament understanding of virginity in relation to the marriage bond explains why the above mentioned Athenagoras summed up Jesus’ teaching on divorce as “not permitting a man to send her away whose virginity he has brought to an end...”

XII. Understanding Matthew 19:9 to be referring to pre-marital unchastity explains why the passage only gives permission for a man to put away his wife for fornication and not a woman the right to do the same. Only a woman could be determined to be guilty of pre-marital sex depending upon whether her hymen ruptured on the wedding night.
or not. (If one rereads the passage they will notice that it is only giving permission for the man to put away his wife for fornication. Nothing is said in the verse about a woman putting away her husband.)

XIII. The fact that there have been Christians in every century since the second century who rejected the idea that post-marital adultery was an exception to Jesus’ strict divorce teachings would imply that this was not how the earliest Christians understood Matthew 19:9.22

XIV. Translating Matthew 19:9 in such a way that it reflects a pre-marital experience which invalidates the marriage rather than a post-marital experience makes it to come into agreement with Jesus’ other divorce teachings which all indicate that there is nothing which happens after a marriage that can end it:

  Whoever puts away his wife, and marries another, commits adultery: and whoever marries her that is put away from her husband commits adultery. Lk 16:18

  And he said unto them, Whoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, commits adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she commits adultery. Mk 10:11-12

  And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: But and if she departs, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put away his wife. 1Co 7:10-11

  The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. 1Co 7:39

  The evidence, taken as a whole, suggests that the best way to translate this passage is as follows:

  “And I say unto you: whoever puts away his wife, except for pre-marital sex, and marries another, commits adultery.”
“For he says that when I was prosecuting Timarchus I said that his porneia was a matter of common report…” (Aeschines, On the Embassy 2:144 [Charles Darwin Adams, tr.])

“For he is guilty of selling his person not only in Misgolas’ house, but in the house of another man also, and again of another, and that from this last he went to still another, surely you will no longer look upon him as one who has merely been a kept man, but— by Dionysus, I don’t know how I can keep glossing the thing over all day long—as a common porneuo. For the man who follows these practices recklessly and with many men and for pay seems to me to be chargeable with precisely this.” (Aeschines, Against Timarchus, 52 [Ibid.])

“When, therefore, I have dared to bring impeachment against Timarchus for having porneuo himself…” (Aeschines, Against Timarchus, 119 [Ibid.])

“For he is amazed, he says, if you do not all remember that every single year the Senate farms out the tax on pornikos (prostitutes), and that the men who buy this tax do not guess, but know precisely, who they are that follow this profession.” (Aeschines, Against Timarchus, 119 [Ibid.])

“And then the assurance of the man! Bringing another man before this court on a charge of porneia! However, I will let that go for the present.” (Demosthenes, Speech 19: On The Embassy, 200 [C. A. Vince and J. H. Vince, tr.])

“But that was nothing: under his eyes sat his brother Aphobetus. In truth, on that day all that declaiming against porneia was like water flowing upstream.” (Demosthenes, Speech 19: On The Embassy, 287 [Ibid.])

“For the daughters of the common people in Lydia practice porneuo one and all, to gather for themselves dowries, continuing this until the time when they marry; and the girls give themselves away in marriage.” (Histories 1:93 [G. C. Macaulay, tr.])

“Now the Lydians have very nearly the same customs as the Hellenes, with the exception that they kata-porneuo (prostitute) their female children…” (Histories 1:94 [Ibid.])

4 Gen 38:12; Your daughter-in-law Thamar has played the whore (ek-porneuo), and see, she is with child by whoredom (porneia). Gen 38:24NETS; Your daughter-in-law Thamar has played the whore (ek-porneuo), and see, she is with child by whoredom (porneia). Gen 38:24NETS; “And Deina the daughter of Leia, whom she bore to Jacob, went out to make an acquaintance with the daughters of the neighbours. And Sychem the son of Emmor the Evite, who was the prince of the country, saw her and took her and lay with her and humbled her…And they (Simeon and Levi) said, But shall they treat our sister like a harlot (porne)?” (Gen 34:1-2, 31Thomson); “And if any one should take a wife, and dwell with her, and hate her, and attach to her reproachful words, and bring against her an evil name, and say, I took this woman, and when I came to her I found not her tokens of virginity: then the father and the mother of the damsel shall take and bring out the damsel’s tokens of virginity to the elders of the city to the gate…But if this report be true, and the tokens of virginity be not found for the damsel; then shall they bring out the damsel to the doors of her father’s house, and shall stone her with stones, and she shall die; because she has wrought folly among the children of Israel, to defile the house of her father by whoring (ek-porneuo): so thou shalt remove the evil one from among you.” (Dt 22:13-21Brenton)

5 “Be ashamed of whoredom (porneia) before father and mother: and of a lie before a prince and a mighty man …” (Sirach 41:17KJV)

6 “This, indeed, is not a remarkable thing; but the most illustrious men of the tribe actually consecrate to her their daughters while maidens; and it is the custom for these first to be kata-porneuo (prostituted) in the temple of the goddess for a long time and after this to be given in marriage; and no one disdains to live in wedlock with such a woman.” (Geography, 11.14.16 [H. L. Jones, tr.])

7 These references can be read in Except For Fornication: Why Evangelicals Must Reevaluate Their Interpretation Of Matthew’s Divorce Exception Clause (SEAN Multimedia, 2011), pp.9-19, available online at

10 The English Schoole-Maister (London: Printed by the Widow Orwin, for Ralph Jackson and Robert Dexter, 1596).
11 A Table Alphabeticall, Conteyning and Teaching the True Writing, and Vnderstanding of Hard Vsuall English Words, Borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French. &c. With the Interpretation Thereof by Plaine English Words, Gathered for the Benefit & Helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or Any Other Vnskilfull Persons (London: Printed by I. R. for Edmund Weauer, 1604).
Articles Home: www.danielrjennings.org/writings


For a detailed analysis of this see Are Bible Translations Progressively Softening The Scriptures On Divorce?, available online at http://www.danielrjennings.org/arebibletranslationsprogressivelysoftening.pdf.


These references can be read in Except For Fornication: Why Evangelicals Must Reevaluate Their Interpretation Of Matthew’s Divorce Exception Clause (SEAN Multimedia, 2011), pp.80-110, available online at http://www.danielrjennings.org/except_for_fornication_version_1.pdf. Justin Martyr (c.100-165AD), Hermas (fl. c.160AD), Theophilus (fl. c. 170-190AD), Athenagoras (fl. c. 177AD), Clement Of Alexandria (d. c. 215AD), Tertullian (c.160-c.220AD), Council Of Arles (314AD), Council Of Elvira (324AD), Gregory Nazianzen (c.325-389AD), Ambrose Of Milan (333-397AD), John Chrysostom (c.347-407AD), Apostolic Canons (c.400AD), Council Of Mileve (416AD), Innocent I (d. 417AD), Council Of Carthage (a.k.a. African Code, 419AD), Jerome (c.340-420AD), Augustine Of Hippo (354-430AD), Council Of Angers (453AD), Finnian (a.k.a. Vinnian, Vinnianus, Finian, d.c.550AD), Adamnan (c.624-704AD), Council Of Nantes (658AD), Council Of Hertford (673AD), Judicium Clementis (693AD), Venerable Bede (c.672-735AD), Council Of Trullo (692AD), Council Of Soissons (744AD), Zacharias (d. 752AD), Excerptions Of Egbert (d.766AD), Synod Of Aachen (789AD), Council Of Friuli (791AD), Sixth Council Of Paris (829AD), Canon List Of Benedict the Levite (c.847AD), Laws of the Northumbrian Priests (950AD), The Penitential Of Archbishop Dunstan (c. 963AD), Council of Evanham (1009AD), Ecclesiastical Laws of King Cnuf (a.k.a.