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Can a Man Commit πορνεία with His Wife?

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In Classical and Hellenistic Greek, apart from use by Jewish and Christian authors, πορνεία meant “prostitution.” Different words from the same word group (built on πορν-) all had something to do with prostitution. Πόρνη denoted a female prostitute, while πόρνος referred to a male prostitute who might be paid for sex with a man or a woman. Τὸ πορνεῖον referred to a brothel, and some form of the verb πορνεύω referred to one prostituting oneself or someone else. Πορνότροφος referred to a pimp. Somewhere along the way, a group of words that in Greek and Latin seem to have originally referred simply to prostitution became in English a word referring, in most people’s usage, to any sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage. But is that all that Paul or other New Testament writers mean when they condemn or warn against πορνεία? In other words, does πορνεία when used by a New Testament writer refer only to “extramarital sex” between a man and a woman, or does it include other activities also? This article suggests that the answer varies depending on whom you ask.

Recent scholars have tended to understand the term πορνεία simply as “sex outside marriage.”¹ This point of view, however, is mistaken, whether the subject is ancient Greece or the later writings of Jews and Christians, and misrepresents the

¹See, e.g., Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). Harper maintains that the Christian injunction against πορνεία is in “radical opposition to all same sex intercourse.” Furthermore, he opines, “The significance of *porneia*, in historical terms, was precisely that it gave a single name to an array of extramarital sexual configurations not limited to but specifically including prostitution.” But he also notes, “Asking what *porneia* means is like asking how a fumigation bomb is shaped” (11–12). Throughout the rest of *From Shame to Sin*, the reader is greeted with a highly ideological reading of Christian texts that use πορνεία disguised as straightforward history. For an alternative to Harper’s work, see David Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating*

history and range of meanings of this term and its cognates. In Classical and Hellenistic Greek, apart from use by Jewish or Christian authors, *πορνεία* meant “prostitution.” Different words from the same word group (built on *πορν-*) all had something to do with prostitution. *Πόρνη* denoted a female prostitute, while *πόρνος* referred to a male prostitute who might be paid for sex with a man or a woman. *Τὸ πορνεῖον* referred to a brothel, and some form of the verb *πορνεύω* referred to one prostituting oneself or someone else. *Πορνοτρόφος* referred to a pimp.

Yet *πορνεία* came to be translated into later Latin by using an older Latin word in a new way. The notion was that prostitutes would often stand under “archways” when attracting customers. The Latin for “arch” was *fornix*. Some form of that word began to refer to prostitutes or prostitution. *Fornicatio* became a term for visiting a prostitute. Among Christian writers, its meaning was further broadened to refer to all kinds of illicit sex. The King James Version of the New Testament uses “fornication” to translate *πορνεία*.

Somewhere along the way, a group of words that in Greek and Latin seem to have originally referred simply to prostitution became in English a word referring, in most people’s usage, to any sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage. Most dictionaries will provide the meaning of fornication as something like “consensual sexual intercourse between two people not married to one another.” Fornication may be differentiated from adultery in that fornication can take place between two people neither of whom is married to someone else, whereas adultery refers to sexual intercourse in which at least one of the persons is married to someone else. In any case, fornication is usually used to refer to extramarital sex.

But is that all that Paul and other New Testament writers mean when they condemn or warn against *πορνεία*? In other words, does *πορνεία*, when used by a New Testament writer, refer only to extramarital sex between a man and a woman, or does it include other activities also? Hence the question posed by this article: Can a man commit *πορνεία* with his wife? The answer: It depends on whom you ask.

I. CLASSICAL GREEK USAGE

The obvious meaning of words of the *πορν-* group in Classical and Hellenistic Greek has something to do with prostitution. The term *πορνεία* itself survives in only a handful of texts.² The Hippocratic text *Epidemics* 7.122 uses it, spelled *πορνείη*. Demosthenes charges an opponent with it, though it seems in this context

Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians, Synkrisis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

²Indeed, according to Harper, in only four texts (“*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” *JBL* 131 [2011]: 363–83, here 369, <https://doi.org/10.2307/23488230>). Jennifer A. Glancy, though disagreeing with other conclusions posed by Harper, agrees with his count (“The Sexual

to be not literal prostitution but an insult that the man has allowed himself to be “screwed” by many other men (*Fals. leg.* 200). Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. rom.* 4.24.4) mentions slaves selling themselves sexually to raise money with which to buy their own freedom. Here he seems to be including male slaves, who would probably be selling their sexual favors to men as well as to women.

The verb form also occurs but, again, always referring either literally or metaphorically to prostitution. Herodotus claims that the daughters of a certain region prostituted themselves to raise money for their own dowries (*Hist.* 1.93). Aeschines accuses his opponent Timarchus of prostituting himself to many men (*Tim.* 52). As in the above example from Demosthenes, this accusation is more an insult than a claim that Timarchus was literally a prostitute. Aeschines repeats the insult in *De falso legatione* 144, again using the verb form and accusing Timarchus. The translator of the Loeb version, Charles Darwin Adams, renders the Greek as referring to Timarchus’s “lewdness,” but the context clearly allows an accusation of (at least metaphorical) prostitution.³ In addition, Demosthenes repeats his insult, this time with the verb form, to refer, probably, to an opponent’s “passive” sexual availability to other men (*Fals. leg.* 233).

The feminine form πόρνη occurs more often and always as a reference to prostitutes, as a quick glance at LSJ will show. The lexicon, in fact, suggests that the word derives from the verb πέρνημι (“to sell”), “probably ... because Greek prostitutes were commonly *bought slaves*” (LSJ, s.v. “πορνεία”).⁴ Male prostitutes are referred to with the term πόρνος (e.g., Xenophon, *Mem.* 1.6.13; Polybius, *Hist.* 12.15.2). The use of the πορν- word group to refer to prostitution and prostitutes extends into later Greek. The reference to Dionysius of Halicarnassus above provides one example from the late first century BCE. Artemidorus’s *Onirocritica* (*Dream Handbook*) provides an example from the second or third century CE. This work does not use the actual word πορνεία, but it refers to a brothel as τὸ πορνεῖον (*Onir.* 1.78).

That the πορν- word group in Greek texts continued to refer to prostitution—and not to “fornication” or forbidden sexual activity in general—is borne out by an examination of papyri from the first century and later. Very few surviving papyri employ terms in the πορν- group, and those that do presuppose the basic meaning “prostitute” or “prostitution.” Prostitution was legal and taxed, though the common terms for the tax in the documentary evidence is τέλος ἑταιρικόν.⁵ The few tax

Use of Slaves: A Response to Kyle Harper on Jewish and Christian *Porneia*,” *JBL* 134 [2015]: 215–29, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbl.1341.2015.2838>.

³Aeschines, *Speeches*, trans. Charles Darwin Adams, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919).

⁴For agreement that πορνεία derived etymologically from πέρνημι (“to sell”), see Allison Glazebrook, “Prostitution,” in *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Classical World*, ed. Mark Golden and Peter Toohey, Cultural Histories (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 145–68, here 147.

⁵Roger Bagnall, “A Trick a Day to Keep the Tax Man at Bay? The Prostitute Tax in Roman

receipts that do use one of the *πορν*- terms refer to the pimp (the *πορνοβοσικός*),⁶ who was apparently responsible for paying the tax due from the brothel, perhaps on a yearly basis.⁷ Still, there are a few instances of *πόρνη* to be found. In a private letter from a husband (Serenos) to his wife (Isidora) from Oxyrhynchus (second century CE), Serenos tries to answer her complaint that he “has sold her as a prostitute” (*πόρνη*), a statement she made through their shared acquaintance Kolobos. Did she mean that her husband actually prostituted her to other men, or was she suggesting that some other action of his led her to such a drastic action? The letter is poorly spelled and the drama behind the episode unclear, but Serenos’s response suggests that he was desperate to make amends for whatever he had done.⁸ A fourth-century (359 CE) collection of juristic decisions from Hermopolis offers another example. In one legal case, the mother of a prostitute (*πόρνη*) requests that the magistrate require the murderer of her daughter to provide for her since, without the earnings from her daughter’s prostitution, she has been left destitute.⁹ The extraordinary circumstances of this case, and indeed of the rest of the sexual crimes recounted in this small codex, may suggest that this papyrus is a rhetorical exercise rather than an actual juridical record.¹⁰ It is striking that the surviving tax documents refer to prostitutes as *ἐταῖραι*, not *πόρναι*, reserving the *πορν*- family of terms for lurid cases or as a title for pimps. As papyrologists Johannes Diethart and Ewald Kislinger conclude in their survey of later Byzantine papyri, *πόρνη* carried the implications of slur while also serving as a label for a profession.¹¹ Thus, though the word *πορνεία* is unusual in non-Christian Greek authors, it and other instances of the same word group are consistently used to refer not simply to sex or to “illicit”

Egypt,” *BASP* 28 (1991): 5–12; C. A. Nelson, “Receipt for Tax on Prostitutes,” *BASP* 32 (1995): 23–33.

⁶See, e.g., PSI 9 1055 b (25 February 265 CE), which registers the payment of the tax from the pimps of the city brothel (... *πορνοβοσικούς όφείλοντας ώς όντας μισθωτάς τών κοινειών τής πόλεως*) and SB 20 14517 (500–599 CE), which also registers the tax received from a *πορνοβοσικός*.

⁷This may have been a yearly sum. See J. R. Rea, “P. Lond. Inv. 1562 Verso: Market Taxes in Oxyrhynchus,” *ZPE* 46 (1982): 191–209. The reference in this receipt is to a *κοινειόν* (brothel).

⁸P.Oxy. 3 528: “Serenus to his beloved Sister, Isidora, many greetings.... You sent me letters which would have shaken a stone, so much did your words move me.... Apart from your saying and writing ‘Colobus has made me a prostitute, he [Colobus] said to me, “Your wife sent me a message saying, ‘He himself [Serenus] has sold the chain and himself put me in the boat”” (Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 3 [London: Egypt Exploration Fund; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903]).

⁹*BGU* 4 1024 = P.Aktenbuch Ms. pp. 3–8.

¹⁰James G. Keenen, “Roman Criminal Law in a Berlin Papyrus Codex (BGU IV 1024–1027),” *APF* 35 (1989): 15–23; Joëlle Beaucamp, *Le statut de la femme à Byzance, 4e–7e siècle*, 2 vols., TMCB 5–6 (Paris: De Boccard, 1990–1992), 1:54.

¹¹Johannes Diethart and Ewald Kislinger, “Papyrologisches zur Prostitution im Byzantinischen Ägypten,” *JÖB* 41 (1991): 15–23, here 21. Compare Dominic Montserrat, *Sex and Society in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Kegan Paul, 1996): “Thus *gynê*, *hetaira* and *pornê* are status designations rather than professional names. Eventually *hetaira* and *pornê* seem to lose their more precise meanings: in the Roman period they have become virtually synonymous” (109).

or “immoral” sex in general but to prostitution, prostitutes, or houses for prostitution.

Both Philo and Josephus follow this Classical Greek usage. Every occurrence of any of the words from the πορν- group in Philo can be taken to refer to prostitution of some sort, even though some English translations render it as “fornication.”¹² This is not surprising since Philo was well educated in Classical Greek. He remained faithful to the Classical and Hellenistic Greek uses of the terms.

Josephus uses these words rarely. He seems never to use the actual word πορνεία. Twice, he uses πορνεῖον as a term for a brothel (*B.J.* 4.562; *A.J.* 19.357), and he calls the mother of Jehu (2 Kgs 9:22) a sorceress and prostitute (πόρνη; *A.J.* 9.118). Indeed, it seems that Josephus avoids the πορν- words for the most part. Even when he is retelling a story from the Bible that uses terms for prostitutes, Josephus uses other language. For example, when Josephus introduces the story of how the prostitute Rahab helped the Hebrew spies in Jericho (Josh 2), he makes Rahab an innkeeper and says nothing about prostitution (*A.J.* 5.5–15). It seems that he is intentionally “cleaning up” biblical stories to render Israel and its history more “respectable” for Greek and Roman consumption. At any rate, on the rare occasion Josephus uses these terms, they always refer to prostitution of some sort. Both Philo and Josephus, therefore, follow the consistent Greek practice of taking πορνεία to refer to prostitution.

II. Πορνεία IN SECOND TEMPLE JEWISH TEXTS

The LXX follows the Classical and Koine practice of using πορνεία and its related words only for prostitution. Such words usually translate the Hebrew זונה, meaning “to be a prostitute or prostitute oneself” (Gen 34:31, 38:15, Judg 16:1, Jer 2:20, Amos 2:7, Mic 1:7, and many others). For example, זונה: prostitution or unfaithfulness likened to prostitution (Num 14:33, Jer 3:2, Hos 4:11); זנונים: prostitution (sometimes metaphorically used to refer to promiscuity more generally; Hos 1:2, Nah 3:4); תזנות: prostitution or lust (Ezek 16:15; 23:7, 11). Some of these occurrences admittedly refer more to idolatry than literal prostitution (Jer 2:20 and many other places in Jeremiah and Ezekiel; see esp. Ezek 23), but it is clear that idolatry is being condemned by metaphorical equation to prostitution.

In Sir 23:27, πόρνος is used for a husband who commits adultery, and a wife who commits adultery is accused of engaging ἐν πορνείᾳ (23:23; the Hebrew of Ben Sira is usually dated to before 180 BCE, and the Greek translation to sometime after

¹²See, e.g., *Mos.* 1.300: F. H. Colson renders the word as “fornication,” but the context suggests that prostitution is more accurate. The king trying to defeat Israel is advised to turn the women of his own kingdom into prostitutes in order to lead the Israelite men to sin (see Num 25). Philo calls one of these women explicitly a πόρνη (1.302). Other instances in which Colson translates πόρνος as “fornicator” and πόρνοι as “fornicators” include *Leg.* 3.8. But the words could just as easily be references to prostitution.

132 BCE). In these cases, we must assume that the terms are not meant literally; rather, they mean that a spouse who commits adultery is by that action “playing the whore.” The reference to prostitution is nonetheless not far afield.

In other Second Temple Jewish texts, *πορνεία* is broadened to include all sorts of actions or even desires that the particular writer considers forbidden. In several instances in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (which, apart from later Christian interpolations, may be dated to the second century BCE), the different forms of the *πορν-* word group refer to any kind of “sexual immorality.” In the Testament of Benjamin, *πορνεύω* and *πορνεία* are linked to Sodom, though what precise sexual action the author has in mind is not made explicit (T. Ben. 9:1). General admonitions against *πορνεία*, with no more precise meaning than some kind of “sexual immorality,” occur often in the Testaments (e.g. T. Reu. 3:3, 5:3, 6:1; T. Levi 9:9; T. Jud. 18:2). In Ascen. Isa. 2:5, *πορνεία* occurs in a list of various sins attributed to the advocacy of Manasseh, along with adultery, sorcery, magic, augury, divination, and “persecution of the righteous.” (This part of the text, sometimes designated as the “Martyrdom” of Isaiah, may be dated to the second century BCE.) In these references, all from later forms of Judaism than that represented in the Hebrew Bible, *πορνεία* takes on a broader meaning, referring to whatever the writers take to be sexual immorality.

In some texts, however, the word group has more specific meanings. In Tobit, for example, the parents of Tobias admonish him, “Beware, my son, of every kind of *πορνεία* (*ἀπο πάσης πορνείας*). First of all, marry a woman from among the descendants of your ancestors; do not marry a foreign woman, who is not of your father’s tribe” (4:12 NRSV; with substitution of *πορνεία* for “fornication”; Tobit could be from the third century BCE, though of course the Greek would be later). The translators of the NRSV use the English “fornication,” but it is obvious that here *πορνεία* does not refer to “sex outside marriage.” Rather, it refers to exogamy or miscegeny. It may even include marriage outside the very Israelite tribe of the parents. The word does not mean “fornication” in the common English sense but intermarriage with persons not of one’s own tribe.

The Greek translation of 1 Enoch uses the word in a similar way. The offspring born of sexual intercourse between the “Watchers” and human women (expanding on the story of the mating of the “sons of God” and human women from Gen 6:1–4) are called “half-breeds,” “bastards,” and “sons of miscegenation,” the last word a translation of *πορνεία* (1 En. 10:9–10). In his commentary on 1 Enoch, George W. E. Nickelsburg rightly argues that *πορνεία* here refers not to literal prostitution but to “intercourse to forbidden degrees.”¹³ The reference is clearly to the sexual mixing of human with nonhuman beings, but it is correct to point out that, by this time and in certain forms of Judaism, *πορνεία* was used to condemn all kinds of sexual

¹³George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36, 81–108*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 223; translations are Nickelsburg’s.

behaviors of which writers disapproved. Nickelsburg is also correct to point out that the word πορνεία was used by Jews of this period to “paradigmatically attack marriage with Gentiles.”¹⁴ For at least some Jews, πορνεία was the gentile sin par excellence, along with idolatry.

Although in some instances Jewish writers could combine references to adultery with those to πορνεία, sometimes πορνεία was used to include a reference to adultery more particularly. In the Testament of Reuben, Reuben’s sexual intercourse with his father’s concubine is called πορνεία (T. Reu. 1:6; see also T. Jud. 13:3). In the Testament of Joseph, Joseph says that Potiphar’s wife was attempting to lure him “into πορνεία” (T. Jos. 3:8; an expansion on Gen 39). The Testament of Reuben uses the same terminology for Potiphar’s wife’s attempt on Joseph (4:8, 11). The word in these contexts is translated by Howard Clark Kee as “sexual promiscuity,” which would probably be better worded with the even more open-ended “sexual immorality.”¹⁵ By this time, many Jews have taken a word that classically meant prostitution and used it to refer to any kind of sexual behavior they condemned.

Finally, we come to a couple of Jewish texts that clearly extend the meaning of πορνεία to include even sexual actions that a man may do with, or passions he could entertain for, his wife. In particular, some Jews considered it to be πορνεία for a man to have sex with his wife motivated purely by sexual passion and lust. In a curious scene in Tobit, Tobias instructs his bride on their marriage night that they should get out of bed and pray rather than consummate their marriage by sexual deeds that night. They refrain from sexual intercourse on their wedding night in order that Tobias can say he is “taking” his “kinswoman” “not because of lust [διὰ πορνείαν] but with sincerity [ἐπ’ ἀληθείας]” (8:7 NRSV). After the prayer, they say “Amen” and immediately go to sleep. Whatever else we may take the scene to mean, it obviously assumes that even sex with one’s wife can count as πορνεία if indulged for the wrong reason.

We recall that πορνεία in Classical Greek always refers in some way to prostitution. The word group is broadened by Second Temple Jews to include other meanings. It is thus significant that texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls do the same with a word commonly used by the Hebrew Bible for prostitution—some form of the Hebrew זנה. For example, 4QD^c (4Q270) 7 I, 13 says, “Whoever approaches to have illegal sex with his wife, not in accordance with the regulation, shall leave and never return.”¹⁶ The word translated as “illegal sex” is זנות, which, as we have seen above, normally refers in the Hebrew Bible to prostitution. The shift in meanings here, from prostitution to even sexual activities within the bonds of marriage, is taken, we think correctly, by Hannah Harrington to mean that a man who has

¹⁴ Ibid., 46.

¹⁵ Howard Clark Kee, “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” *OTP* 1:775–828, here 784.

¹⁶ Trans. Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–1998), 1:616–17.

“sexual intercourse for pleasure” rather than procreation, even with his wife, thereby makes her, at least metaphorically, a prostitute.¹⁷

But the scrolls use some form of the same word for other activities, such as marriage between an uncle and his niece, a man taking two wives, and even divorce and remarriage.¹⁸ Indeed, several scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls agree that some form of the word זנות in the scrolls is regularly used for all kinds of sexual deeds condemned by their authors.¹⁹ The Hebrew-language scrolls exhibit the same shift we discerned in Second Temple Jewish texts in Greek: a word group that referred to prostitution in “Classical” Hebrew or Greek, comes to be used by later Jews to include condemnation of any kind of sexual action of which the writers disapproved. At least for some Jewish texts from the Second Temple Period, the answer to our question is, “Yes! A man can commit πορνεία with his wife.”

III. JEWISH NOTIONS OF “SEXUAL IMMORALITY” IN THE HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN PERIODS

We may get some idea of what Jewish authors considered immoral sexual activities by noting what they condemn even when not explicitly using the term πορνεία. Jubilees 50:8, for example, condemns any man for “lying with his wife” on the Sabbath. Josephus insists that good Jews engage in marriage and sex “only for the procreation of children” (*C. Ap.* 2.199 [Thackeray, LCL]). In the same context, Josephus says that a Jewish man will not have sex with his wife if she is pregnant, implying once again that some Jews condemned sex apart from the possibility of pregnancy. Philo insists on the same. He has his character Joseph insist that, for Jews, the goal of marriage is not “pleasure” but procreation of “lawful children” (*Ios.* 43 [Colson, LCL]). Elsewhere he teaches that even sex “according to nature,” and

¹⁷Hannah K. Harrington, *The Purity Texts*, Companion to the Qumran Scrolls 5 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 47; see also 17 for CD forbidding people from having sex on the Sabbath.

¹⁸These actions are from CD IV, 20–V, 11. For the condemnation of a man taking more than one wife (in his lifetime), see the thorough discussion of different possible interpretations in Cecilia Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document*, AcBib 21 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 114–18. Wassen argues that, since remarriage of a widow was not condemned in the scrolls, what is probably meant is polygyny. On what is meant by “fornication with one’s wife,” Wassen surveys different possible meanings but settles on sex purely for pleasure without the goal of procreation (173–79). Yonder Moynihan Gillihan shows that זנות was used to condemn many different sexual actions, including intermarriage with outsiders. See his *Civic Ideology, Organization, and Law in the Rule Scrolls: A Comparative Study of the Covenanters’ Sect and Contemporary Voluntary Associations in Political Context*, STDJ 97 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 244, 256–57 n. 393, 267, 424, 472, 723, 723 n. 40. See 4QMMT^c (4Q396) IV, 4, 11.

¹⁹Besides the works of Wassen and Gillihan already cited, see also Gillihan, “Jewish Laws on Illicit Marriage, the Defilement of Offspring, and the Holiness of the Temple: A New Halakic Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:14,” *JBL* 121 (2002): 711–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3268578>.

even within marriage, must be condemned if it is prompted by immoderate or insatiable desire. He also condemns sex while the woman is menstruating, because that would entail the “wasting of seed.” It makes sense, then, that he also condemns sex with a barren woman or sex with a woman the man knows to be sterile because of a previous childless marriage (*Spec.* 3.9, 33, 34, 36).²⁰

The Jewish author whom scholars call Pseudo-Phocylides also includes several different deeds and desires among condemned sexual sins, though he does not use the word πορνεία in this context. He advises men not to “outrage” their wives “by shameful ways of intercourse” (ἐπ’ αἰσχυντοῖς λεχέεσσιν, 189).²¹ He warns against any “unlawful sex” (ἐξ Κύπριν ἄθεσμον) that transgresses “the limits set by nature,” including same-sex intercourse, women taking the “male” role in sex (λέχος ἀνδρῶν), and any sort of “unbridled sexuality” (ἔρωτα ... ἀκάθεκτον) even with one’s wife (190–193). A few lines before, he had already ruled out sex with one’s wife when she is pregnant (186). Pseudo-Phocylides does urge marriage and procreative sex (175–176). But just about anything outside that is condemned, even if done with one’s spouse. For many Jews, the only “legitimate” sexual activity was procreative sex with one’s lawful wife or husband—and apparently with the husband as the “penetrator” and the wife the “penetrated.” Everything else was forbidden.

IV. “ACCORDING TO NATURE” AND “CONTRARY TO NATURE”

A number of different ancient authors address what they considered to be “natural” and “unnatural” sexual activity, including Jewish as well as non-Jewish writers. Artemidorus, the second-century CE Ephesian author of the *Onirocritica*, considered the topic by examining the possible meanings of dreams in which one has some kind of sex with some kind of person. He divides up sexual relations into three categories: natural and lawful, natural and unlawful, and unnatural or

²⁰ See the discussion in Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Gender and Geopolitics in the Work of Philo of Alexandria: Jewish Piety and Imperial Family Values,” in *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, *BibInt* 84 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 63–88. D’Angelo mentions “gormandizing and wine-bibbing leading to bestiality,” sex again with one’s divorced wife if she has had sex with another man since her divorce, prostitution, and various other activities, many of which a man could commit with his wife. D’Angelo convincingly argues that Philo is throughout trying to outdo the piety of the strictest Romans in Augustan “family values.”

²¹ Trans. Pieter W. van der Horst, *OTP* 2:581. Note the footnote by van der Horst: “Though several explanations of this line are possible (intercourse during menstruation, Lev 18:19; ‘variations’; violating; adultery), probably it forbids intercourse that is not for the sake of procreation, strongly condemned by both Jewish and (some) Gk. writers.” For the Greek text, see Douglas Young, ed., *Theognis; Ps.-Pythagoras; Ps.-Phocylides; Chares; Anonymi Aulodia; Fragmentum Teliambicum*, 2nd ed., BSGRT (Leipzig: Teubner, 1971).

contrary to nature.²² Artemidorus presumes that the subjects of almost all these actions are men, advising his (male) clients that natural and lawful includes sex with one's wife, with female prostitutes, with a woman one does not know, with one's male or female slave, with a woman one knows, either penetrating or being penetrated by another man, masturbation, and being masturbated by a slave. The category "natural and unlawful" includes mostly incest with a family member of different relations. Sex "contrary to nature" includes having sex with oneself, kissing one's own genitals, oral sex with oneself, a woman penetrating another woman, a woman being penetrated by another woman, sex with a god or goddess, sex with the moon, sex with a dead person either male or female, and sex with a wild beast either active or passive (sex with domesticated animals is strangely not mentioned).

This last category seems to include only those actions that at least Artemidorus considered impossible, seemingly because he could not imagine how they would be accomplished. It is interesting, though, that Artemidorus considered male–male penetration completely natural and lawful. He knew that it happened all the time. But he seems not to have been able to imagine how one woman could sexually penetrate another, so that counted as "contrary to nature."²³

Jewish authors also supply quite different categories for natural and unnatural sex. As we have seen, Philo condemned having sex with a woman the man knew could not become pregnant, but he adds that doing so would make the man an "enemy of nature" (*Spec.* 3.34–36). Philo believed that the men of Sodom "threw off the law of nature" in being wealthy, enjoying excess of luxury, indulging in unbridled lust for their wives and the wives of their neighbors, and having sex with other men, which Philo abhors because it would necessarily overturn the hierarchy of "nature" (*Abr.* 133–136).²⁴

Philo believes he is following Plato in condemning male–male or female–female sexual intercourse as contrary to nature. "Natural" intercourse occurs "when male unites with female for procreation" (*Spec.* 1.636a–c). That male–male sex is unnatural is demonstrated by the fact that "wild beasts" do not practice it. Moreover, that kind of sex springs from excess, luxury, and lack of self-control. Note that the *desire* itself is natural, the indulgence is not. What makes the sex "unnatural" is that one of the males would have to "play the woman's part." Condemnation of same-sex intercourse is therefore based in misogyny: a man must not be penetrated like a woman because men are superior to women—and to effeminate men also. Unlike Artemidorus, therefore, Philo considers many kinds

²²The discussion is at *Onir.* 1.78.

²³As Bernadette J. Brooten points out, "In Artemidoros's eyes, female penetration is not real penetration, and female homoeroticism is a pale and futile imitation of male sexual behavior" (see her *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996], 186).

²⁴Whereas Artemidorus taught that a male being penetrated by another male was both "lawful" and "natural," Philo believes male–male intercourse "contrary to nature" no matter the position taken by any specific male.

of sexual behaviors to be “contrary to nature,” and therefore condemned. The only “natural” sex is with one’s wife for the purposes of procreation.

V. Πορνεία IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus forbids a man to divorce his wife “except on the basis of πορνεία” (παρεκτός λόγου πορνείας, 5:32; μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία, 19:9); if she is sent away for any other reason, her husband makes her into an adulteress (ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι, 5:32).²⁵ A similar denunciation of divorce is preserved in the Gospels of Mark and Luke as well as in Paul’s letters, but the πορνεία exception clause is unique to Matthew. Other examples of these sayings present Jesus forbidding divorce entirely (Mark 10:11-12, Luke 18:18, 1 Cor 7:10-11). Matthew never clarifies what is meant by this exception, but at the very least πορνεία seems to be something other than adultery (μοιχεία). If the writer had meant to indicate that divorce was permissible for *adultery*, why not employ the more specific term? The two terms are also employed in a vice list, when Jesus explains that evil intentions, murder, μοιχεία, πορνεία, theft, false witness, and blasphemy “come from the heart” (15:19). In the context of the divorce sayings, πορνεία is identified with the woman, μοιχεία with the man (he makes the woman an adulteress or becomes an adulterer himself, either by remarriage or by marriage to a divorced woman; 5:32, 19:9). On the face of it, then, the πορνεία of the wife and the μοιχεία of the husband distinguish two separate categories of behavior.

Seeking further clarity, modern New Testament scholars have proposed a variety of interpretive options for the woman’s πορνεία, concluding that Matthew was referring to (1) her involvement in prostitution, either before or during her marriage;²⁶ (2) her status as an unbeliever (the man has therefore contracted an “exogamous marriage”); (3) the incestuous nature of the union (as a gentile and prior to adopting Christ, the man contracted a marriage forbidden by Leviticus);²⁷ or (4) her status as a concubine rather than a wife (the marriage was therefore never “legal”).²⁸ Some scholars conflate the two categories, arguing that πορνεία

²⁵For an overview, see Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 125–47.

²⁶Jerome made this suggestion in the fifth century (*Comm. Matt.* 3.19.9). Abel Isaakson suggests that premarital sex was in view (*Marriage and Ministry in the New Temple: A Study with Special Reference to Mt. 19.3–12 and 1 Cor. 11.3–16*, trans. Neil Tomkinson and Jean Gray, ASNU 24 (Lund: Gleerup, 1965), 132–39. See also Dale C. Allison, “Divorce, Celibacy, and Joseph,” *JSNT* 49 (1993): 3–10. But for a different interpretation, see William Loader, *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 70–72.

²⁷Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Matthean Divorce Texts and Some New Palestinian Evidence,” *JTS* 37 (1996): 197–226; and James R. Mueller, “The Temple Scroll and the Gospel Divorce Texts,” *RevQ* 10 (1980): 247–56, here 255–56.

²⁸John L. McKenzie, *Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew* (1981; repr., Eugene,

is a functional equivalent of *μοιχεία*,²⁹ though to us this seems the least persuasive point of view. Given the care with which Matthew differentiates between *πορνεία* and *μοιχεία*, it seems safe to conclude that *πορνεία* refers to something other than extramarital sexual intercourse on the part of a wife.³⁰ But exactly what it refers to remains a mystery.

According to Cecilia Wassen, only two documents from the Second Temple period, Tobit and 1 Thessalonians, use *πορνεία* in the context of marriage.³¹ Rarely found in the gospels, *πορνεύω* occurs frequently in the Pauline letters.³² For Paul, *πορνεία* may refer to any illicit sex. In 1 Cor 7:2, for example, marriage saves a man from *πορνεία*. But for the most part, *πορν-* words occur only in vice lists (1 Cor 5:11, 15:9, 2 Cor 12:21, Gal 5:19, Col 3:5, 1 Tim 1:10, Eph 5:3). A major exception is 1 Thess 4:3–6. Here Paul condemns all forms of nonmarital sex as sexual immorality, and he labels improper sexual relations within marriage as *πορνεία*—especially when such actions are based on desire:

For this is God's will, your sanctification: that you abstain from *πορνείας*. Each one of you should know how to possess [κτᾶσθαι] your *σχεῦος* in holiness and honor, not in the passion of desire [πάθει ἐπιθυμίας], like the gentiles who do not know God. Let no one take advantage or cheat his brother in this matter.³³ (our translation)

Σχεῦος refers either to a man's body or to his wife. The scholarship on the subject is evenly divided.³⁴ Ernest Best, however, makes a convincing case that *σχεῦος* refers

OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 19–20; Alexander Sand, “Die Unzuchtsklausel in Mt 5,31.32 und 19,3–9,” *MTZ* 20 (1969): 118–29.

²⁹Most recently, William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality*, Attitudes towards Sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman Era (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 246–47.

³⁰See Deut 24:1 (LXX), which allowed a man to divorce his wife for any “unseemly deed” (*ἄσχημον πρᾶγμα*). Kyle Harper has argued that *πορνεία* and *μοιχεία* refer to the same activity: Matthew employed *πορνεία* to evoke the shame of the woman's sexual activity outside marriage, but he intended to indicate her infidelity (Harper, “*Porneia*,” 376). Origen also links Deut 24:1 to Matt 19:9, but, unlike Harper, he worries that the *πορνεία* exception could be interpreted too loosely. Origen points out that the focus of the Lord's saying is the husband and his conduct, which can all too easily seem to tolerate adultery on the part of the wife: if he sends her away falsely, he makes her an adulteress; if he fails to control her, allows her to befriend other men, or fails to satisfy her sexual desires, he may also make her an adulteress. The *πορνεία* exception therefore calls the man to a higher standard (*Comm. Matt.* 14.24). On the reception of the *πορνεία* exception in the writings of the church fathers, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 239–50.

³¹Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document*, 176.

³²Incest is called *πορνεία* in 1 Cor 5:1, and in 1 Cor 6:9 *πορνεύω* is used alongside *μοιχεύω*.

³³First Thessalonians was likely written to a male audience. For more on this theory, see Lone Fatum, “Brotherhood in Christ: A Gender Hermeneutical Reading of 1 Thessalonians,” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), 183–97.

³⁴For an overview of the scholarship, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the*

to a “wife” rather than a “vessel.” He bases his interpretation on a parallel passage in 1 Pet 3:7 and the use of כֵּלִי (“vessel”) in Second Temple Jewish documents.³⁵ In 4QInstruction^b (4Q416) 2 II, 21, for example, we find the expression בְּלִי יְקִיכָה, “the wife of your [bo]som,” which suggests that σεῦθος in 1 Thess 4:4 likely refers to a wife. Moreover, the word κτάομαι (“acquire”), which Paul also employs in v. 4, has sexual overtones. When used in the context of marriage, it typically means “to possess a woman sexually,” or “to live with a woman.”³⁶ In 1 Thess 4:3–6, Paul contrasts the attitude toward marital sex of Christ followers with that of the gentiles. As Wassen asserts, “Whereas Christians who are pure and holy (2 Thess 3:13; 4:7) can engage in marital relations with holiness and sanctity, the sinful gentiles, who do not know God, have sexual relations with lustful passion.”³⁷ Thus, as we have already seen with Tobit, Paul uses πορνεία to refer to illicit sexual relations in marriage, especially sexual actions driven by passion and desire (πάθει ἐπιθυμίας).

It is significant that in 1 Thess 4:3 the word πορνείας is preceded by the definite article τῆς, which has a “generic quality.”³⁸ Some manuscripts replace the definite article with πάσης (“all”; \aleph^2 Ψ 104 365) or add πάσης to the article (F G^c), which means that some copyists understood πορνεία in v. 4 as having the “general sense of immorality, including fornication.”³⁹ If we were to ask Paul, then, if a man can commit πορνεία with his wife, he would say, “Yes!” especially if he has sex with her out of lustful desire. In our opinion, Matthew likely thinks the same thing.

VI. Πορνεία IN THE CHURCH FATHERS

Overall, the church fathers do not like marriage. John Chrysostom compares it to slavery (*Vid.* 40.1), while Basil of Ancyra is just as brash when he writes, “With her dowry, a woman buys herself a master” (*Virg.* [PG 30:718]). Gregory of Nyssa goes so far as to proclaim that the virginal life is how Christians stop death (*Virg.* 14.1), and Augustine claims that, though marriage brings forth children, “it is better not to marry, because it is better for human society itself not to need this

Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 226–28. See also John T. Noonan Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965), 41.

³⁵ Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 166.

³⁶ John Strugnell, “More on Wives and Marriage in the Dead Sea Scrolls: (4Q416 2 ii 21 [cf. 1 Thess. 4:4] and 4QMMT B,” *RevQ* 17 (1996): 537–47; translations are Strugnell’s. Best points out that κτάομαι can also mean, “to win someone for oneself” (*Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 166).

³⁷ Wassen, *Women in the Damascus Document*, 177.

³⁸ Ernst von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicherbriefe*, 7th ed., KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1909), 163.

³⁹ Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 225. See also Best, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 160; and Béda Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, EBib (Paris: Gabalda, 1956), 502.

activity" (*Bon. conj.* 9).⁴⁰ But do any of the fathers ever suggest that γάμος ("marriage") is πορνεία or that a man can commit πορνεία with his wife?

In the mid-second century, Tatian baldly asserts that γάμος is πορνεία.⁴¹ We see this clearly in *On Perfection according to the Savior*, where Tatian insists that Paul links sexual activity to uncontrolled, satanic fornication in 1 Corinthians 7 (ἀκρασία καὶ πορνεία καὶ διαβόλω; Clement, *Strom.* 3.12 = Tatian, *Fragments* 5). Additionally, he pronounces marriage a "bond between husband and wife ... a physical union leading to corruption." Furthermore, he claims that marriage is "a partnership in corruption," which weakens prayer.⁴² Finally, in his *Oratio ad Graecos*, he declares, "I have no desire to rule, I do not wish to be rich; I do not seek command, I hate sexual immorality [πορνείαν μεμίσηκα]" (11.1). Since sex enslaves a person to the devil, the only solution is to renounce any and all sexual activity. Otherwise, every time a married couple sleeps with each other, they commit πορνεία.

Irenaeus condemns Tatian and charges him with "encratism" since, in his estimation, Tatian's rejection of marriage is at odds with Gen 1:27–28, which for many Christians and Second Temple Jews demands procreation (*Haer.* 1.28.1).⁴³ But others did not entirely agree with Irenaeus's outright assault on Tatian. Clement of Alexandria, for example, condemns Tatian's "encratism" while simultaneously finding some truth in his proclamation that γάμος is πορνεία. But instead of referring to marriage as πορνεία, he stops short, linking it instead with μοιχεία. Like Irenaeus, Clement points to Gen 1:28 and argues that it is incumbent on all Christians to be fruitful and multiply.⁴⁴ The best way to fulfill this goal is by having a large family

⁴⁰ For an overview of Augustine's complex views, see David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy*, OPCS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 269–84.

⁴¹ Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 32.

⁴² All English quotations from Tatian, with some modifications, come from Molly Whittaker, *Tatian: Oratio ad Graecos and Fragments*, OPCS (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

⁴³ Though the Western church condemns Tatian from the start, the Syrian church will not pronounce any sort of judgment on him until the twelfth century. The reason for this is that well into the third century, Syriac-speaking Christians took a vow of celibacy at baptism or later after having one or two children. See Arthur Vööbus, who reasons that if Tatian had been born in the East instead of the West, he would have been claimed as a saint rather than condemned as a heretic (*Celibacy: A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church*, PETSE 1 [Stockholm: Estonian Theological Society in Exile, 1951], 17). For a complete recounting of the charges against Tatian, see William L. Petersen, "Tatian the Assyrian," in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"*, ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 142–52. For a general overview of encratism, see Gilles Quispel, "The Study of Encratism: A Historical Survey," in *La tradizione dell'enkrateia: Motivazioni ontologiche e protologiche; Atti del Colloquio internazionale, Milano, 20–23 aprile 1982*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985), 35–81.

⁴⁴ Clement's interpretation of Genesis follows Philo, who understood the LXX as endorsing procreation. For an overview, see David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey*, CRINT 3.3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 132–56; and Annewies van den Hoek, *Clement of*

(*Paed.* 2.10.83). Even though Clement acknowledges that certain biblical texts command large families, he places severe limits on Christian sexual intercourse.

Reinterpreting Deut 14:7, “Do not eat the hare or the hyena,” Clement maintains that God “does not want man to be contaminated by their traits nor even to taste of their wantonness, for these animals have an insatiable appetite for coition” (*Paed.* 2.10.83). Additionally, he notes that eating the hare is a condemnation of pederasty. Later he asserts, “The mysterious prohibition [of Moses] in reality is but counsel to restrain violent impulses, and intercourse in too frequent succession.”⁴⁵ In this condemnation, Clement includes relations with a pregnant woman, pederasty, adultery, and lewdness (2.10.88). In fact, Clement goes far beyond some Second Temple writers, such as Philo, by noting that the two-word Tenth Commandment in the LXX, οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις (Exod 20:17 LXX; Deut 5:21 LXX), makes any instance of sex for pleasure rather than procreation apostasy (*Protr.* 108.5; *Strom.* 3.71.3, 3.76.1, and 3.57.1–2).⁴⁶

In many respects, Clement imposes a much more restrictive rule on Christians than Paul or any other Second Temple author. Wives, for example, must never take the initiative in the sexual act. They belong on the bottom since they are subordinate to their husband (*Strom.* 3.94.5). And a husband must never ejaculate in a part of his wife’s body other than her vagina, and then only for procreation.⁴⁷ This means, of course, that Clement forbids all forms of oral and anal sex.

Book 2 of Clement’s *Paedagogus* contains an entire chapter devoted to the subjects of wedlock and sexual intercourse. Though Clement is not as forthright as Tatian, he does discuss γάμος and sex between a husband and wife under the heading of πορνεία. He begins chapter 10 by naming various impurities, which he terms ὀνόματα πορνικά. These include: coarse speech (ῥημάτων δὲ ἀκολάστων), disgraceful behavior (σχημάτων ἀσχημόνων), sensuous love affairs (φιλημάτων), and other unspecified acts of coition (τοιουτωσί τινων λαγνευμάτων). He urges Christians to follow what he believes are the words of Paul in Eph 5:3: “But all πορνεία and ἀκαθαρσία and πλεονεξία must not even be named among you, as is proper among the saints.” Next he maintains that the only type of sexual intercourse (συνουσία) acceptable under the law (νόμος) is the kind that produces children (ἐπὶ παιδοποιίᾳ). He even adds that committing adultery with a prostitute is a death wish (τὴν μοιχείαν ἐπὶ πόρνη τηρουμένη). Furthermore, he deems same-sex acts among males

Alexandria and His Use of Philo in the Stromateis: An Early Christian Reshaping of a Jewish Model, VCSup 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

⁴⁵ Translations of Clement are from Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon P. Wood, FC 23 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1954; repr., 2008).

⁴⁶ For more on this, see Harry O. Maier, “Clement of Alexandria and the Care of the Self” *JAAR* 62 (1994): 725–28.

⁴⁷ See the important comments of Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*, Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 325–26.

παρὰ φύσιν. Thus, Clement not only defines *πορνεία* in its Classical Greek sense; he expands it to include racy speech, disgraceful behaviors, and any acts of coition that do not ultimately lead to the production of children.

But the most stunning thing Clement says is still to come. Though he does not directly link *γάμος* with *πορνεία*, he does argue that any man who has sex with his wife for the purpose of pleasure (*ἡδονή*) adulterates his marriage (*μοιχεύει γὰρ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ γάμον ὁ ἔταιριζόμενος αὐτόν*). For Clement, a man might not be able to commit *πορνεία* with his wife, but he can certainly commit *μοιχεία* with her. Having said that, we should keep in mind that everything Clement says falls under the heading of *ὀνόματα πορνικά*, so it is possible that he thinks sex for the sake of pleasure is not just *μοιχεία* but also *πορνεία*. As much as Clement seeks to distance himself from Tatian, “he nonetheless agrees with the encratites that innate sexual desire is fornicating servitude to Aphrodite and Eros.”⁴⁸

VII. CONCLUSION

The definition of *πορνεία* as “sex outside marriage” is predicated on the presumption that male–female sexual intercourse was the governing norm throughout antiquity and neglects to account for the much broader definitions we have detected here. *Πορνεία*, as ancient Christians and Jews employed it, cannot be limited to the definition “sex outside marriage” because it regularly included sexual activity both inside and outside marriage’s confines. As we have argued, *πορνεία* in Second Temple Judaism and in the early church fathers often refers to exogamy or miscegeny and to sex between a husband and a wife based on lust and desire. Indeed, early Christians and Second Temple Jews expanded the “classical” definition of *πορνεία* to include activities well beyond visiting a prostitute and same-sex acts. This more expansive meaning from the Second Temple writers and the church fathers should likely be assumed as the meaning of *πορνεία* for New Testament writers as well. In particular, we should assume this broader meaning for Paul and the Gospel of Matthew.

Though it may seem difficult to pinpoint exactly what this word study means for modern readers of the New Testament, we believe the answer is quite simple. By the reckoning of early Christian authors, including those of the New Testament, anyone who has engaged in a sexual act and enjoyed it is guilty of *πορνεία*. This means, of course, that modern attempts to relegate *πορνεία* to same-sex acts and sex outside marriage need to be reevaluated. It is not just sex acts outside marriage that were deemed illicit and were condemned by Second Temple Jews and early Christians; certain acts within marriage also received the stigma of *πορνεία*. Thus we return to our original question, Can a man commit *πορνεία* with his wife? In certain circumstances, the answer of the New Testament writers was yes he can.

⁴⁸Kathy L. Gaca, *The Making of Fornication: Eros, Ethics, and Political Reform in Greek Philosophy and Early Christianity*, HCS 40 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 270.