

Translating Sex: Issues with the Translation of Sexual Terms in 1 Corinthians
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Introduction: An underlying assumption of much modern Western thinking about sexual relations entails the expectation that most sexual relations are engaged in by free people with other free people (ours are largely democratic and socially egalitarian societies) on a consensual basis. We have one category of illicit non-consensual sexual relations, rape, and multiple categories of consensual relations that include licit relations within marriage and illicit relations outside of or in transgression of marital relations. In the ancient Greco-Roman world in which 1 Corinthians (and the rest of the New Testament) was written the terms and categories are remarkably different.

First, the fundamental importance of slavery and the stratification of life in general (including stratification between the rights of citizens and non-citizens, between men and women and between masters, freedmen/women and slaves, among others) led to very different ways of conceptualizing sexual relations. References to various kinds of sexual relations by New Testament authors, including Paul, reflect the ways different kinds of sexual relations were understood in their world and the different understandings of Christians, which are responses to the sexual practices and norms of the world around them in light of Jewish tradition and understandings of Scripture. The sexual terms that are used are from and refer to norms and practices of that world and not from our own. The distinction between people with honor that should be preserved and people without such honor marks the usage of several of the key terms. While modern Western interpreters tend to assume that sex is something that two people do together much of the ancient terminology refers to an action that one person does with or to another and that either brings dishonor to a person (or persons) of honor or does not.

1. πόρνη/πορνεία/πόρνος/πορνεύω:

A. Background to Greek Term(s)

The first term in this list is the easiest to discuss, and will be dealt with briefly although much more could be said about the practice or institution to which it refers.

The term for prostitute and the nature and ubiquity of prostitution in the Greco-Roman world is well known. Given the difference between that world and our current contexts I think it is worth adding the reminder that most (but hardly all) ancient prostitutes were slaves and had little to say about their sexual activity. Whether they were purchased or raised to work along side other prostitutes in a brothel, or were hired out from a private home, most had perhaps even less to say about their “profession” than modern prostitutes (who are also usually victims and often little recourse, despite the illegality of their situation).

What is left unclear in most modern translations in Western European languages is that the other terms are also suggestive of prostitution in one way or another, literally or figuratively. Harper's discussion is worth citing:

In classical Greek, *porneia* is the activity of prostituting oneself, not the institution of commercial sex or any class of forbidden acts. Before its adoption by religiously inspired sexual activists, *porneia* referred squarely to the production, not the consumption, of venal sex. Likewise, in classical Greek the *pornos* was the male prostitute—the gigolo, not the john. Tellingly, for Paul it was the reverse, and it can be confidently asserted that the meaning of *porneia*, for Paul, was not derived from the classical heritage. The Christian understanding of *porneia* was inherited from Hellenistic Judaism. The word first entered the parlance of Hellenistic Judaism as a calque of the Hebrew *zenuth*. The core meaning of the Hebrew verb *znh* [zayin nun he] describes the activity of a woman who loses her sexual honor. This sense dominates the primitive strata of the Jewish Bible. Because legitimate female sexuality was strictly confined to marriage, a woman who engaged in any extramarital sex was guilty of *zenuth*. In the patriarchal logic of early Hebrew culture, she became a “whore,” and the feminine participle, *zonah*, was the primary word for prostitute throughout the biblical period.”¹

“The metaphorical sense of זנׁת as idolatry would decisively influence the development of Greek πορνεία. The metaphorical meaning allowed spiritual fornication to be used with acts of male commission.”²

“[C]lassical Greek lacked a single, encompassing term to describe the different forms of sexual experience open to men in the form of slaves, prostitutes, and concubines. These classical inflections must be kept in mind as we consider the challenges of translating Hebrew sexual morality into Greek.”³

“Ultimately, πορνεία in Paul's letters does have the broad sense of “sexual immorality,” but we must recognize what especially this meant in the context of the Greek city under Roman rule, where sex with dishonored women was permitted, legally and culturally. It is revealing that, whereas authors of the Roman period saw sex with prostitutes or slaves as the solution to adultery, Paul saw marriage as the solution to the temptations of easy sex with dishonored women (see, e.g., Horace, *Sat.* 1.2.31–35).”⁴

“The usual translations—“fornication” and “sexual immorality”—reflect the breadth and flexibility of the term's meaning, but they obscure its actual content and connotations....

¹ Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 88-89.

² Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” 370.

³ Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” *JBL* 369.

⁴ Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” 379.

[T]o understand what the word could mean in various ancient texts, it is necessary to appreciate both the many strata of textual meaning that accrued over the centuries and the ever-present influence of social structure on ancient sexual morality. The pervasive misunderstanding of the classical meaning of πορνεία has obscured the radicalism of Judeo-Christian πορνεία. Classical πορνεία was the act of selling oneself, not a whole class of actions categorized as immoral. Jewish and Christian πορνεία could evoke the whole array of extramarital sex acts of which Greek and Roman culture approved. The word πορνεία so effectively and so dramatically condensed the differences between pre-Christian and Christian sexuality that it requires some effort to reenter the sexual culture of the Mediterranean at a time when sexual norms were immanent in patterns of social reproduction. Πορνεία is indeed extramarital sex—but Christian “fornication” developed amid a society where the legitimacy of heterosexual contact was determined not by the presence or absence of marriage so much as the status of the woman involved.”⁵

“When Paul heightened the term’s meaning, he also foreshadowed a certain narrowing of the term porneia and its scope in gentile Christianity. The specter of sexual lassitude presented by the libertine faction immediately suggested not the establishment of a free love commune but the traditionally harmless and ‘lawful’ outlet for male sexual energies: prostitution. The availability of dishonored women traced the profoundly different foundations of sexual morality in the outside world. It was almost inevitable that fornication would come to identify, ever more narrowly, the types of extramarital sexual license entrenched in gentile society, centered on bodies without access to sexual honor. In First Corinthians, Paul has set his sights not on heavy petting gone too far among young innocents in the congregation, nor on carnal bohemianism. Far more consequentially, Paul intended to dam the traditional canals long approved as spillways for the inevitable sexual heats of young men in the ancient world.”⁶

B. Traditional Translations of the Term(s) in English and Romance Languages

English (Tyndale, Bishops, Geneva, KJV): fornication, fornicators, commit fornication

Spanish Reina-Valera (1909) fornicación; fornicarios; fornicar.

French Louis Segond (1910) l'impudicité; impudiques; livrer point à l'impudicité

Portuguese Almeida: fornicação; os que se prostituem; prostituir-se

C. Common Modern Translation Choices for the Term

French, TOB inconduite (1Co 5:1 TOB)

French Bible en français courant (1997)l'immoralité (1Co 5:1 BFC)

⁵ Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” 383.

⁶ Harper, *From Shame to Sin*, 92.

Portuguese: gente que pratica imoralidades sexuais.

More often than not, reflecting, I suppose, a particular application of domesticating approaches to Bible translation, they have recently been translated by expressions similar to “sexual immorality,” “sexually immoral people,” or “commit sexual immorality” (see NIV, French, *débauche* or *l’immoralité*; German translations now tend towards *Unzucht treiben*)

D. Potential Problems with Common Modern Translation Choices

Earlier translations into English and the Romance languages tended to reference “fornication,” essentially creating calques of the Latin “fornicatio” (while Luther went with “Hurerei treiben” in 1 Cor. 10:8). As Kyle Harper points out, “To translate it as ‘fornication’ is mere convenience. Fornication is ecclesiastical argot—and always has been. Even in the astonishingly rich sexual vernacular of Latin, there was no word ready to hand to translate *porneia*, and an equivalent had to be hastily contrived. Fornicatio was derived from *fornix*, literally an arch and figuratively a den of venal sex.”⁷ Presumably because prostitutes were thought or known to loiter under arches and similar places that would provide protection from the elements.⁸

In my opinion there are two potential problems with the more recent approach to translating the key terms as “sexual immorality” “the sexually immoral” or “commit sexual immorality.” First, to translate any term “sexual immorality” assumes two things, first that the biblical texts think in terms of two simple categories: moral sexual behavior and immoral sexual behavior. That is clean and simple but I think it reflects our desire for simplicity more than it does the actual way in which Paul and his readers thought about sex. Secondly it assumes that the readers’ understanding sexual morality is already correct and needs no guidance or correction. Whatever they understand sexual immorality to be in their own understanding and culture is what those terms evidently mean to identify. But it is important to remember that in Paul’s Jewish and Christian context most of the porn- terms were used to refer to sexual activity that most Roman society considered largely acceptable. As long as an honorable woman (or her husband) was not being robbed of her honor or acting in a way that led to her own dishonor, there wasn’t any real moral problem. The term was used of things that most people considered morally acceptable but that were rejected by Jews and Christians whose understanding of sexual morality required attention to more than the protection of the honorable status of married women (and the children of people with honor). It seems questionable to use translation terms that assume a background rooted in an uncontested understanding of sexual morality when in fact the biblical terms reflect a contesting of what others considered moral.

⁷ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁸ Somewhat similar to the English euphemism of “street walkers” which associates prostitutes (of a certain kind) with a behavior that is not uncommon to other people (who doesn’t walk on streets?).

2. μοιχός

A. Background to the Greek Term(s)

“The distinction between πόρνος and μοιχός, even in Paul’s writings, does not turn on the man’s marital status; hence “fornicator” and “adulterer” are misleading in English. The overwhelming and pervasive sense of μοιχός is “violator”—one who trespasses on honorable female sexuality. The sense of πόρνος is larger and less distinct. The one (πόρνος) implies the man with a lascivious lack of self-control; the other (μοιχός) implies the man who corrupts respectable women. To understand what these words mean, we must recognize that Paul’s discourse is firmly lodged in the context of the Greek city under the Roman Empire.”⁹

For Greeks and Romans adultery did not refer to any and all extramarital sex engaged in by a married person. It had been strictly defined as offense of men (married or otherwise) having sex with a married woman other than their wife. Sex with slaves (male or female) and various kinds of prostitutes was common and while expected to be engaged in discreetly, was not considered adultery.

As Harper points out, “The principal term of sexual transgression in classical Greek was μοιχεία, which meant ‘violation of a respectable woman.’¹³ ... Athenian law held that a man was not a μοιχός if he had sex with a woman who sits in a brothel or sells herself openly (Demosthenes, [*Neaer.*] 59.67). This exemption from the adultery law, paralleled in later Roman law, sharpened the ideological distinction between respectable women, ἐλεύθεραι, and promiscuous women who were outside the protection of a κύριος and therefore the state.¹⁴ Μοιχεία refers specifically to the man’s violation of a respectable woman; although the standard English translation of the word is “adultery,” it would be better to emphasize “violation of a woman’s honor,” since the overwhelming connotation of the word points to the violation itself, even in later Jewish and Christian usage.¹⁵ The μοιχός violates a woman, not his own marriage bond; there is no female equivalent.”¹⁰

“Violation, shame, and dishonor were inherent extensions of the principal crime, μοιχεία. But the dynamics of female sexual respectability in classical Greece left a number of women beyond the pale of social honor. The group of women who were not ἐλεύθεραι included slaves, prostitutes, and courtesans.”¹¹

B. Traditional Translations of the Term(s) in English and Romance Languages

Adulterers (and cognate terms).

⁹ Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” 377-8.

¹⁰ Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” *JBL* 131 (2012), 367.

¹¹ Harper, “*Porneia*: The Making of a Christian Sexual Norm,” 367.

C. Common Modern Translation Choices for the Term

Adulterers.

D. Potential Problems with Common Modern Translation Choices

One problem with translating the term as adulterers (and similar terms in many languages) is that in many modern languages the term is understood to apply to any sexual relations engaged in by a married person with someone other than their spouse. This is a more inclusive understanding which may be in agreement with the sexual expectations of Paul and early Christians, but is not what this term meant. Once this term understood to cover so much ground the other terms in Paul's vice list(s) may naturally be assumed to refer to various kinds of sex that unmarried people might engage in since this term covers all of the transgressions married people might commit. So the following terms are understood to be referring to sexual behavior of unmarried single or gay people, and not to behavior of married men and the previous term is understood to refer to sex between consenting adolescents or at least between consenting unmarried people. The fornication/adultery combination ends up being understood in terms of virtually all sexual offenses committed by heterosexual single people on the one hand and by married people on the other, with the final terms being understood to be specifically focused on more problematical sexual activities of unmarried people. But these are modern western (democratic and egalitarian) schemas for organizing thought about sexual sins and not those reflected in the original terms and contexts.

3. *μαλακός* and *ἀρσενοκοίτης*

A. Background to the Greek Term(s)

4. These two terms¹² from Paul's vice list have had a complicated history of interpretation and are treated in diverse ways in modern translations. It has commonly been understood that both terms referred to male same-sex relations of one form or another. Most recent translations have suggested translations for these two vices as something like "male prostitutes and practicing homosexuals" (TNIV; cf. ESV, NET, earlier editions of the NIV, etc.). Many have thought that the terms would be best understood as referring to those who willingly play the passive and active roles in male-to-male sexual acts. It is important to keep in mind that Paul is not discussing 'homosexuals' per se, but sexual acts that were commonly engaged in by Roman men who were also active in heterosexual relationships. In the Roman world, male same-sex relations were invariably exploitative relations between men of quite contrasting social statures.¹³ It was not uncommon for

¹² Gk. *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs*. For an earlier treatment of the complicated question of translation see Scroggs 1983. John Boswell's thesis (1980) that *arsenokoitēs* refers to active male prostitutes has been soundly refuted by Wright 1984:125–53.

¹³ See the discussions in Williams 2010 (esp. xiii-xiv).

married men to have sex with their wives (as well as female slaves and prostitutes) and to also engage in sexual relations with male prostitutes or slave boys or other young men of lower class who had little freedom to refuse.¹⁴ Here we find a situation similar to that discussed under the theme of *porneia*. That is, the Roman world was full of boys and men whose bodies and honor were not protected by Roman law, and whose exploitation was commonplace and accepted.

This behavior was thought by most Romans to be perfectly consistent with the identity of elite Roman male and seems to be the likely target of the final vice listed in 6:9, *arsenokoitai*. Paul's opposition to such behavior clearly cuts sharply against mainstream Roman attitudes and mores.

Paul's rejection of a behavior understood by most Romans to be consistent with the identity and prerogatives of the elite Roman male makes his reference to the penultimate vice listed in 6:9 all the more interesting, since the term he uses there suggests some commonality with Roman understandings of gender, as it was commonly used in Roman discussions of behaviors consistent with true manhood and those that were understood to betray authentic masculinity. Many have suggested, as pointed out above, that it should be understood in conjunction with the term that follows it as a reference to those who desired or willingly assumed the passive role in a same-sex encounter between men. But as others have pointed out, although there are very numerous references to male same-sex encounters in Greek literature there is no evidence that the two terms were ever used in tandem before they appeared together in Paul's vice list or that they were ever previously used to signify the two different roles that were assumed in such encounters.¹⁵ This term (*malakoi* = soft [men]) had a very broad usage, especially as part of common sexual slander as Roman men challenged each other's masculinity. It was used generally of men thought to be effeminate, although effeminacy had particular cultural associations and currency which are not quite the same as those of other cultures, including our own. Women and boys were understood to be soft, while men were supposed to be hard. To call a man "soft" suggested he was womanly in some way. The term was used apart from direct sexual allusions to suggest a man was cowardly and unwilling to stand up for what is right.

In the context of sexual vices the word usually suggested the man was sexually "passive" as a woman was expected to be, most commonly because it was thought that he was

¹⁴ On the violent and degrading nature of the experience see Parker 1993:53-4, 57-8; *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitiones* 9.23 [lines 21-24]; *Anthologia Palatina* 9:686 [line 5]. Cf. Gen. 19:4-9; Judg. 19:22-25. Martin's (2006:38-43) attempt to discredit the understanding that *arsenokoitia* refers to male same-sex relations is unconvincing, but he does provide good evidence that the term had to do with sexually oppressive and/or exploitative acts.

¹⁵ See Belleville 2011:27-9.

happy to be sodomized by another man, but possibly because he was willing to engage in sexual behavior with women that was considered unmanly.¹⁶ A man could also be called effeminate for being overly active in sexual pursuits with women – that is, for being what we might call a ‘ladies’ man.’¹⁷ To choose one particular behavior, such as willingly accepting the passive role in a same-sex encounter, and deciding that that is what Paul meant, is not exactly arbitrary (since that would be the most common transgression eliciting such a label), but certainly gives the word a meaning which is more narrow and precise than the evidence suggests.

Even in cases where *malakoi* was used to refer to men who enjoyed being penetrated rather than abusing others, we should not assume that consensual relations are in mind. Again, in the Roman world the stratification of society meant that male slaves and prostitutes (with most of the latter also being slaves) would be the most common sexual “partners” of those seeking out that experience. It is difficult for moderns (and postmoderns) to remember that in Paul’s world virtually no sex (not even within marriage) took place between people who were considered peers. So Richlin points out that, “In the ancient Mediterranean, as elsewhere, sexuality recapitulates power relations within individual cultures”¹⁸ and Halperin refers to “the age-structured, role-specific, hierarchical pattern that governed all respectable and virtually all recorded sexual relationships between males in classical antiquity.”¹⁹

All of the sexual behaviors associated with “softness” relate to women’s perceived tendency to fail to respect proper boundaries and practice self-mastery so as not to be ruled by their passions.²⁰ We should also remember that we are not dealing with a “Christian” term for a Greco-Roman vice, but with a Greek term for a vice that had particular currency in Paul’s Greco-Roman context. While the whole set of associations cannot be expressed in one or two words, and the tie with feminine weaknesses in particular would be lost, I would suggest that “promiscuous men” or “sexual profligates”

¹⁶ For example, by focusing on giving the woman pleasure rather than expecting her to serve the pleasure and interests of the man, or by performing *cunnilingus* on a woman (or *fellatio* on a man). These were all considered to be extremely degrading acts, worthy only of prostitutes or slaves (or to be debasing for any person to perform, in the third case).

¹⁷ See Williamson 2010:144-8; Parker 1993:58, 65n27; Martin 2006:46-7. Numerous Roman authors refer to men who either sought to make themselves appear less physically mature, and (according to the culture) more sexually attractive to men (and/or women) who preferred sex with adolescent males. Romans believed that such men could be identified by their feminine gait, gestures, clothing and voice, and that these signaled enslavement to sexual passions and an unmanly lack of sexual restraint that would also manifest itself in a willingness or desire to play a passive sexual role (thought appropriate only for women) and to pursue inappropriate sexual relations with men or women.

¹⁸ Amy Richlin, “Sexuality” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (edited by Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1399.

¹⁹ David M. Halperin, “Homosexuality” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (edited by Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 721.

²⁰ See Williams 2010:127, 138-9; Knust 2006:27, 37-44.

(or, for a longer expression, “those who engage in sexual license”) may get to a key part of what effeminacy suggested to the ancient reader (as well as womanly behavior).²¹ And that concern is reflected in Paul’s positive emphasis on self-control in 7:5, 9, 37; 9:25. Paul agrees with the Roman view that true (Christian) men (and implicitly Christian women as well) are to manifest self-control but for him that self-control is reflected in greater restraint that was expected by most Romans since he limited sexual relations to those enjoyed within the confines of the marriage relationship. This is the ultimate contrast with the basic weakness underlying “soft” men.

If it is felt that the two terms both refer to same-sex relations between males there is still no reason to assume they refer to couples engaged in consensual acts. One option would be to translate the terms as “those who exploit boys or men” (that is, slaves or trafficked boys or men) with the understanding that those committing the vice involving the penetration of males are usually exploiting boys while those who commit the vice in which they themselves are penetrated are exploiting adult men.

B. Traditional Translations of the Term(s) in English and Romance Languages

“nor wantons, nor buggerers (Geneva), “nor weaklinges, nor abusers of them selues with mankind” (Bishops Bible); “nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind” (KJV);

C. Common Modern Translation Choices for the Terms

“nor effeminate, nor homosexuals” (NASB); “any kind of homosexual” (HCSB); “anyone practicing homosexuality” (HCSB rev); “nor men who practice homosexuality” (ESV); “nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders” (1984 NIV); “nor men who have sex with men” (2011 NIV); “the self-indulgent, sodomites” (NJB); “male prostitutes, sodomites” (NRSV).

D. Potential Problems with Common Modern Translation Choices

It has been argued above that the concept of a homosexual sexual identity or orientation is foreign to the Roman world (although the idea that some men would want to be penetrated by other men was common and considered abhorrent by most). Translations like “any kind of homosexual” have Paul name a demographic group familiar to our society but different from what would have been understood in his own. The translation “effeminate” for *malakoi* raises all sorts of other questions.

5. *γυναικὸς ἀπτεσθαι* (1Cor 7:1)

²¹ The term should be understood to include, and the translation should be broad enough to include, those whose promiscuousness, license or profligacy included homosexual and/or heterosexual transgressions.

A. Background to the Greek Term(s)

Paul's use (or citation of the Corinthians' use) of the euphemism of "touching" in 7:1 has been interpreted as a total rejection of all kinds of sexual relations.²² Based on a more thorough review of the evidence for the euphemism than previously carried out I have recently argued that while interpreters have been correct to understand "touching" as a euphemism for sexual relations, they have erred by not noting that it is not used indiscriminately for any and all sexual relations but rather for those that do not fall into the category of sex for procreation within marriage but rather for types of sexual relations that would not have been condoned by many ancient Roman moralists who were not committed in any way to sexual abstinence.²³ This leaves open the possibility (that Brian Rosner and I have argued for elsewhere)²⁴ that the euphemism of touching was not used for sex in general, but for recreational sex in particular and that the conflict in Corinth was not between people approving of the use of prostitutes and people rejecting sex altogether, but between people who approved the use of prostitutes (and household slaves and other common sexual outlets besides one's spouse) and those who felt that sex should only be engaged in within marriage and for the purposes of procreation.

In summary, the euphemism has been used in reference to acting on sexual passions for the sake of pleasure or sexual relief (Plato, *Leg.* 8.837b-d; 8.840a), using various kinds of people for one's own sexual gratification (slaves or people taken forcibly into one's household [Gen. 20:4, 6; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.163-164; 4.257; Plutarch, *Alex.* 21.9 and *De Alex.* 339e; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 1.17], a defenseless woman [Ruth 2:9], a virgin placed in one's protective care [Euripides, *El.* 50-51], a wife during her menstrual period [Philo, *Spec.* 3.32]), a pederast's relation with his lover (Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 634a), other 'unnatural' homosexual relations (Plato, *Leg.* 8.836c), incestuous relations (Plato, *Leg.* 8.838b, including one's step mother: Pseudo-Phocylides 179), rape or adultery (Euripides, *Hipp.* 885, 1026, 1044; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.57; Prov. 6:29), sex with one's defiled concubine (*T. Reu.* 3:15), sex with any well-born or free person other than one's wife (Plato, *Leg.* 8.841d), and sex with anyone at all other than one's wife (Aristotle, *Pol.* 7.14.12 [1335b]).

There was a tremendous amount of sexual activity in the Greco-Roman world, and most of it was referred to by way of other terms and euphemisms and not by means of the euphemism of 'touching'. However, it is noteworthy that when 'touching' was used, it was not for sexual relationships in general, but for sexual relationships motivated by pleasure or passion instead of by procreation, reason, or marital friendship. Furthermore,

²² Some have thought it was a euphemism for marriage (see the first [1978] edition of the NIV and the arguments of Caragounis 1996). This view has not garnered much support, thanks in part (at least) to the important articles by Gordon Fee (1980, 2003).

²³ See Ciampa 2008 and 2011.

²⁴ See Ciampa, 2008; Ciampa and Rosner (2010:272-5).

in the vast majority of these examples, the authors (even though they were not committed to celibacy or opposed to sex in general) would use the euphemism when they wanted to indicate that it was good (or would have been good) for the man to not ‘touch’ the woman (or other person).

B. Traditional Translations of the Term(s) in English and Romance Languages

Touch a woman

C. Common Modern Translation Choices for the Term

Touch a woman; have sex/sexual relations with a woman, (sometimes) marry a woman

D. Potential Problems with Common Modern Translation Choices

The translation “touch a woman” is open to being mistaken as a dramatically conservative recommendation, but preserves the euphemism that might still be understood as a foreignizing touch and allow for the explanation of the meaning in a paratextual resource. The translation “marry a woman” has been discredited by careful work by various scholars. The translation, “have sex (or sexual relations) with a woman” misses the remarkable contrast between the idiom in 1 Cor. 7:1 and the one informing 1 Cor. 7:2-5. The relations in vv. 2-5 are explicitly referring to mutual consensual relations within marriage and the uninformed reader is likely to assume, if both euphemisms are translated in similar ways (as in the NIV where in both cases it is “have sexual relations with”), that the same type of sexual relations (and perhaps the same partners) are in view. But the ancient reader would realize that they are remarkably different kinds of relations. Women didn’t touch men, but men touched women (and boys). Touching was not something two people did to each other, but something a man did to the object of his sexual desire, and it virtually always entailed relations outside of a marriage where one person exercised power for their own sexual gratification. Paul’s teaching in 1 Cor. 7:2-5 points to a strong contrast with the type of sexual relations mentioned in v. 1, not continuity.

6. ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἔχέτω (1Cor 7:2)

A. Background to the Greek Term(s)

In Paul’s mind, the way to avoid the perils of extramarital sex is literally “to have” your own wife or husband, not in the sense of acquiring one, but by maintaining regular sexual relations with the one you already have.³⁰ The verb “to have” may mean “to stand in a close relationship to someone” and thus simply point to a family relationship: to have a son or a father or a wife or a husband (BDAG [2a]). And so Paul could mean simply that

³⁰ Fee, 278.

each man should have his own wife.³¹ In some cases, however, the verb seems to mean to have sexual relations with the woman.³² The verb is usually used in the indicative mood to refer to the present or prior existence of an established marriage (“he has/had a wife”), while the verb “to take” is normally used for the establishment of a new marriage.³³ Here the imperative³⁴ for each one to “have” his own³⁵ wife suggests the maintenance of sexual relations from time to time (cf. on 5:1 and the NIV on 7:1). The verb in 7:1 links the present discussion with that of incest in chapter 5: in one sense the solution to “having” (sex with) your father’s wife (or any other inappropriate woman) is to “have” (sex with) your own wife.

- B. Traditional Translations of the Term(s) in English and Romance Languages
- C. Common Modern Translation Choices for the Term
- D. Potential Problems with Common Modern Translation Choices

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³¹ This seems to be the usage in 2 Chr. 11:21; Isa. 54:1; 1 Esdr. 9:12, 18; Jdt. 10:19; Tob. 3:8; Mark 12:23; Luke 20:28, 33; 1 Cor. 7:12(–13), 29.

³² Cf. H. Hanse, “ἔχω,” *TDNT* 2:817 n. 5: “In the expressions γυναῖκα ἔχειν and ἄνδρα ἔχειν, ἔχειν implies more than a legal relationship, but for the most part it is used, not for personal fellowship, but as a technical term for sexual intercourse; even outside marriage one may ‘have’ a woman or a man.” This seems to be the usage in Deut. 28:30; Isa. 13:16; Matt. 22:28; 1 Cor. 5:1.

³³ Gk. λαμβάνω: e.g., Gen. 4:19; 6:2; 11:29; 12:19; Mark 12:19, 20; Luke 20:28, 29.

³⁴ The imperatives in this pericope (vv. 2, 3, 5; ἐχέτω; ἐχέτω; ἀποδίδωτω; ἀποστερεῖτε) are all present imperatives, consistent with the generally relevant instruction Paul is providing on the subject.

³⁵ The use of the adjective ἴδιος (“one’s own”; each one should have *his own* wife), probably also points to a reference to a previously established marriage within which sexual relations are to be continued.

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