DOES PORNEIA MEAN FORNICATION?

BY

DR. BRUCE MALINA

Omaha, Nebraska

In contemporary English usage, fornication means "1: human sexual intercourse other than between a man and his wife; sexual intercourse between a spouse and an unmarried person; sexual intercourse between unmarried people—used in some translations (as AV, DV) of the Bible (as in Mt. V 32) for unchastity (as in the RSV) or immorality (as in NCE) to cover all sexual intercourse except between husband and wife or concubine 2: sexual intercourse on the part of an unmarried person accomplished with consent and not deemed adultery" 1). This definition is clearly bound up with biblical exegesis and mirrors the opinion of most, if not all, exegetes who take up the task of describing what the N.T. authors call porneia. Thus, for example, BAUER-ARNDT-GINGRICH hold that porneia means "prostitution, unchastity, fornication, of every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse" 2). ALLO, like most commentators 3), points out that "porneia, chez Paul, à

3) E. P. ALLO, Première Épitre aux Corinthiens (Études Bibliques, Paris, 1934) 117; note also, e.g., C. K. BARRETT, A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (New York, 1968) 121: "... in the New Testament however it (porneia-fornication) is regularly used for unchastity and sexual irregularity of almost any kind"; O. J. BAAB, "Fornication," IDB II, 321: "In the N.T. the words for 'fornication', 'to practice fornication' etc. refer to every kind of sexual intercourse outside of marriage"; K. GRAYSTON, "Adultery, Fornication, Harlot, Whore, etc.", in A. RICHARDSON (ed.), A Theological Word Book of the Bible (New York, 1950) 16: "Fornication (znh, porneia) is sexual intercourse outside marriage or even sensuality in general"; F. W. HALL, "Adultery (Christian)," in J. HASTINGS (ed.), Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics I (Edinburgh, 1908) 132: "This (the word porneia-fornication) serves to include all those 'lusts of the flesh which war against the soul' (1 P. ii, 11) ..." In HALL’s description of “fornication”, the word refers to all extramarital sexual relations without distinction; cf. also M. S. ENSLIN, The Ethics of Paul (Nashville, 1957) 154-156; H. LESÊTRE, "Fornication", DB II, 2314-2317; etc. Naturally this list could be extended indefinitely.
moins que le contexte n’indique la fornication au sense propre, signifie toute espèce de dérèglement charnel”. And in their article dealing with the word group “pornei̊ ktl.” in TDNT VI, HAUCK and SCHULZ write: “The N.T. is characterized by an unconditional repudiation of all extra-marital and unnatural intercourse. In this respect it follows to a large degree the judgment of O.T. and Israelite preaching and transcends the legalistic practice of later Judaism, which is shown to be inadequate by the Word of Jesus” 1).

Now the question I wish to pose here is the following: does the N.T. usage of the porneia word group in fact cover all the meanings generally given the word group by the lexica and commentaries, or do the meanings ascribed to the word group rather derive from later usage and later moral judgment deriving from a historically and culturally conditioned version of N.T. morality? In other words, is the description of porneia offered by the lexica and commentaries and subsequent versions the result of exegesis or eisegesis? And specifically, does porneia mean fornication?

The N.T. evidence is not at all clear 2). The porneia word group occurs in the following types of texts: 1) apocalyptic—with general reference to idolatry in an apocalyptic mood: Apoc. ii 14, 20, 21; ix 21; xiv 8; xvii i, 2, 4, 5, 15, 16; xviii 3, 9; xix 2; xxi 8; xxii 15; 2) the sin catalogues: Mk. vii 21; Mt. xv 9; Gal. v 16; 1 Cor. v 11; vi 9; 1 Tm. i 10; 3) passages aimed at Christian proselytizing or instruction: Acts xv 20, 29; xxi 25; 1 Cor. x 8; 1 Thes. iv 3; Heb. xiii 4; and perhaps also here: Mt. v 32; xix 9; 4) development of an earlier instructional form similar to the Qumran triad of “worst of

1) p. 590.

2) The O.T. is much clearer: cf. GRAYSTON, art. cit., 16-17: “In the O.T. there is no condemnation of sexual relations that do not violate the marriage bond ... Opposition to fornication arises entirely from its connexion with religious prostitution (cf. Lev. xxi 7,9)” ; and especially L. M. EPSTEIN, Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism (New York, 1967, reprint of 1948) 167: “The Bible does not seem to consider non-commercial and unpremeditated sexual contact between a man and an unmarried woman as harlotry. In fact the Bible has no prohibition against it, either for the man or for the woman. It takes up this subject only in connection with the rape or seduction of a virgin, and there is is treated not as a moral crime, but as a civil case against the man for theft of virginity. That the family was outraged by such an act, there is no doubt, and in the older law the case was left to the family to square it with the offender, upon whom was visited the full horror of the ancient blood revenge. But from the time of the earliest formulation of biblical law, the family could do nothing but demand payment for the stolen virginity or give the girl in marriage to the ravisher. This done, the girl was not a harlot and the man was not a criminal.”