

Linguistic and Cultural Analysis of 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 in Translation

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1 Corinthians 7:36-38 is one of the most challenging texts in the *New Testament*, and its intriguing nature has led many scholars over the centuries to work on interpreting it. The primary issue lies in the relationship between “τις” and “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” in 7:36. In this paper, I review the three main interpretations that scholars have proposed over the last two thousand years: *Virgines Subintroductae*, fiancé-fiancée, and father-daughter. By comparing the various forms of exegesis, I find that each interpretation has its own merits and shortcomings from linguistic and logical perspectives. In light of this, I reinterpret the passage based on the text, context, and social context. Comparatively speaking, the father-daughter interpretation is the most persuasive of the three because it conforms to both Pauline theology and teachings, as well as Roman law and the cultural customs of 1st-century Roman-colonized Corinth.

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哥林多前書第七章 36—38 節 譯文的語言和文化分析

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哥林多前書第七章 36—38 節是新約聖經中最難解的經文之一，歷來眾說紛紜，吸引了許多學者致力於闡釋其意涵。論釋的焦點在於經文中「有人」與「他的處女」之間的關係。本文旨在回顧過去兩千年間學者們提出的三種主要詮釋路徑：「靈性婚姻說」、「未婚夫婦說」和「父女關係說」。透過比較分析各種詮釋觀點，本文發現從語言學和邏輯學的角度而言，每種解釋皆有其優勢與侷限。有鑑於此，本文嘗試根據經文本身、上下文脈絡以及當時的社會文化背景重新解讀此段經文。經過評估，本文認為相較之下，「父女關係說」是三種詮釋中最具說服力的，因其不僅符合保羅的神學教義，也與第一世紀羅馬殖民地哥林多的法律規範及文化習俗相契合。

關鍵詞：習俗、釋經、歷史批判、處女、社會背景

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Introduction

It is a puzzle that has endured for nearly two millennia: What kind of relationship is presupposed in 1 Corinthians 7:36, “Εἰ δέ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει” (*Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 2012, 1 Corinthians 7:36)? Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations in this article are taken from the *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (1989), with Greek texts from *Nestle-Aland 28*. Central to the interpretive difficulty of this verse is the semantic and relational ambiguity between “τις” (someone) and “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” (his virgin). Although the Greek phrase “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” admits a literal rendering as “his virgin,” its referent within the literary and social context of the passage remains disputed. On the one hand, a long-standing line of interpretation understands the phrase as denoting a father and his unmarried daughter; on the other hand, a number of modern interpreters read it as referring to a man and his fiancée. Conzelmann (1981) regarded the problem as so resistant to resolution that he merely surveyed the competing possibilities without committing himself to any of them (pp. 167-169). This lack of consensus is clearly reflected in the history of biblical translation. Whereas most earlier English versions translate “his virgin” as “his daughter,” many modern English translations render the phrase as “his betrothed” or “his fiancée,”¹ a tendency that has likewise influenced several modern Chinese Bible translations, which adopt renderings such as “his virgin friend,” “his girlfriend,” or “his fiancée.”²

¹ English Bible translations referred to here include the *Revised Standard Version* (1952), *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (1989), *Holy Bible: New International Version* (1978/2011), *New American Bible* (1970/2011), *The New English Bible* (1970), and *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985).

² Chinese Bible translations include 《呂振中譯本》 (*Lu Zhen Zhong Translation Bible*, 1970), 《環球聖經譯本》 (*Worldwide Chinese Bible, New Testament*, 1976/2015), and 《新漢語譯本》 (*Contemporary Chinese Version*, 2010).

As noted above, recent Chinese translations of 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 have shown significant variations. This discrepancy in translation raises questions among readers: Why does the same passage yield such divergent interpretations? This paper aims to explore the root of this issue, analyzing the factors leading to these different translations, and proposing a more plausible interpretation. In doing so, it seeks to provide readers with a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in *Bible* translation.

The opinions on the relationship between “τις” and “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” can be divided into three main categories:

1. Spiritual marriage, which means that the virgin is the *Virgo Subintroducta* of the man.
2. Quasimarital relationship or sexual partnership, which has three possibilities:
 - A man and his fiancée.
 - A brother-in-law and his sister-in-law whose betrothed husband has died (Collins, 1999, p. 299).
 - A man and a woman who were unmarried lovers before they converted to Jesus Christ, but now that they are members of the church, their relationship is to start over (Molvaer, 2004, pp. 45-59).
3. Guardian and ward (the more traditional understanding):
 - In the Roman Empire of Paul’s time, the guardian can refer to a male slave owner. In this case, “his virgin” in the proper text is probably his bondmaid, whom he can take as a concubine for himself or marry to another man.
 - The guardian is more commonly understood as a parent, usually the father. Thus, these verses in 1 Corinthians may refer to a father and his daughter or a stepfather and his stepdaughter.

Of the three categories, which is most probable in the context in which St. Paul was writing to the Corinthians in the middle of the 1st century? In this paper,

we will discuss the possibilities in context and social context and engage in some exegetical analysis of the text itself. In this discussion, it is inevitable that I must involve other methodologies such as historical criticism, in discussing the social context; therefore, I will apply methodological pluralism (Tannehill, 1990, p. 4) where necessary. 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 is taken as a whole, since 7:37 is the further development and explanation of 7:36, while 7:38 is the summary of this pericope.

Virgines Subintroductae

The Latin term *Virgines Subintroductae*, derived from Greek “παρθένοι συνείσακτοι,” first appeared in the 3rd century and refers to a virgin living in the home of a man who has embraced lifelong celibacy to take care of his domestic needs. Such a couple would live as a married couple in almost every aspect with the exception that they would not have sex. These virgins or widows considered themselves united with the ascetic man in a spiritual marriage for mutual assistance in achieving high spirituality (Kugelman, 2003, p. 539). As in a spiritual marriage, the virgin would be protected by the mature Christian man for life as if they were related, as well as under his spiritual guidance (Seboldt, 1959, p. 113).

The Shepherd of Hermas tells of an ascetic seer who lives with certain virgins in a nonsexual relationship, but the seer is identified as their brother rather than their husband (*The Shepherd of Hermas*, 2003, Similitudines 9.11.1-8).³ Seboldt (1959) suggests that the presence of such unabashed episodes in this book indicates that the church may have tolerated such behavior at that time (p. 178). This reflects the possibility that spiritual marriages existed in the very early church, and this may

³ *The Shepherd of Hermas* is a 2nd century CE Christian text consisting of visions, mandates, and parables. It was widely read in the early church and sometimes considered scripture. The work primarily addresses Christian morality, repentance, and church order, providing valuable insights into early Christian thought and practice (Osiek, 1999).

have been an embryonic form of spiritual marriage. It should be noted, however, that *The Shepherd of Hermas* is an apocalyptic work, and its language is highly symbolic. The text itself states that the virgins mentioned earlier refer to “holy spirits” (*The Shepherd of Hermas*, 2003, Similitudines 9.13.1-2). This means that Seboldt’s speculations need to be reconsidered in light of the symbolism employed in the text.

In the 19th century, German scholars (Gräfe, 1899, pp. 57-69; Weizsäcker, 1886, pp. 675-676) connected spiritual marriage with 1 Corinthians 7:36-38. Enlightened by previous research, Hans Achelis investigated all known cases of men and women living together without sex in Christian history. He found that the Therapeutae community in Alexandria appeared to have practiced spiritual marriage, as they “had men and virgins [who] could live in individual huts, each to himself” (Achelis, 1902, p. 32). This practice in Therapeutae could have influenced the Corinthian church through Apollos,⁴ who had come to Corinth from Alexandria (Achelis, 1902, pp. 29-32). Tatian the Assyrian seemed to agree with spiritual marriage as a way of living, since he changed Luke 2:36 to “She remained a virgin with her husband for seven years” (Achelis, 1902, p. 19). Another example is Valentinus, who instructed his church members to practice spiritual marriage instead of ordinary marriage (Achelis, 1902, p. 16). A similar situation was practiced by Paul of Samosata, who had two virgins with him on his journeys (Achelis, 1902, pp. 7-8; Eusebius of Caesarea, ca. 4th century/1890, 7.30.12). From the 4th century on, churches in different areas of the Mediterranean world began to forbid spiritual marriage, from which Achelis (1902) conjectures that spiritual marriage had formerly been prevalent far and wide (pp. 218, 319). Achelis (1902)

⁴ Apollos was a 1st-century Alexandrian Jew and influential Christian teacher. Mentioned in Acts 18:24-28 and several times in 1 Corinthians (1:12, 3:4-6, 3:22, 4:6, 16:12), he was known for his eloquence and scriptural knowledge, playing a significant role in the early Corinthian church.

posits that 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 talks about a spiritual marriage in which one or both parties had vowed to practice celibacy, but lived together, undertaking all marital obligations except for sex (pp. 7-14).

This view seems to have been well received in the first half of the 19th century; Kirsopp Lake was one of its vigorous supporters. He agreed with Achelis and suggested that men and women had “made a practice of living together under a vow of virginity... [but] the situation was proving too great a strain for human nature” (Lake, 1911, pp. 189-190). Under these circumstances, they sought advice from Paul and got the answer “Let them marry.” The famous contemporary scholar of the *New Testament* James Moffatt also agrees with the explanation of spiritual marriage (Moffatt, 1938, p. 180). Taking advantage of this trend, *The New English Bible* (1970) has translated 1 Corinthians 7:36 as:

[b]ut if a man [τις] has a partner in celibacy [τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ] and feels that he is not acting properly towards her, if, that is, his instincts are too strong [ἢ ὑπέρακμος] for him, and something must be done [καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι], he can do as he pleases; there is nothing wrong in it; let them marry. (1 Corinthians 7:36)

The spiritual marriage interpretation has some advantages over the traditional one. According to the traditional understanding, 1 Corinthians 7:36 “Εἰ δέ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει, ἐὰν ἢ ὑπέρακμος καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι, ὃ θέλει ποιεῖτω, οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, γαμεῖτωσαν” (*Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece*, 2012, 1 Corinthians 7:36) is translated as “[b]ut if any man thinks that he behaves himself uncomely toward his virgin, if she passes the flower of *her* age, and need so require, let him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry” (*Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1769/2017, 1 Corinthians 7:36). This traditional understanding, which can be simply transformed into a relationship

between father and daughter, is awkward in syntax, as the subject of the sentence changes from the beginning to the end.

- 7:36a if any man thinks that he behaveth himself uncomely toward his virgin, (the subject is τις, i.e., the father)
- 7:36b if she passes the flower of her age, (ἐὰν ἦ ὑπέρακμος, the subject is she, that is, the daughter)
- 7:36c and need so require, (καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι, the subject is it)
- 7:36d let him do what he will, (ὃ θέλει ποιείτω, the subject is him, that is, the father)
- 7:36e he sinneth not, (οὐχ ἁμαρτάνει, the subject is he, i.e., the father)
- 7:36f let them marry. (if γαμείτωσαν is used as a causative verb, the subject is the father; it can also be “they,” that is, the virgin daughter and her fiancé)

Compared with the translation in the *Holy Bible: King James Version* (1769/2017), the translation of 1 Corinthians 7:36 in *The New English Bible* (1970) is syntactically better, as the subject is “he” throughout almost the entire sentence. However, the translation in *The New English Bible* (1970) is more of a paraphrase than a translation. It is acceptable to render “τις” as “a man” in the context, but it is problematic to translate “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” as “a partner in celibacy” because “a partner in celibacy” can be a man or a woman. The second half of the sentence is even more problematic. If the man’s instincts (sexual desire) are too strong for him, could he “do as he pleases”? If the man wishes to marry the girl, should the girl obey, cooperating even if it violates her will? Should he not respect the will of the girl? In most social situations, he would be required to respect her will because “his virgin” is independent of him before their marriage. Moreover, if the girl is under a vow of virginity, is it acceptable for her to break this vow in order to marry the man whose sexual desire is strong and who now proposes to her?

Greg Peters also agrees with the interpretation of spiritual marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:36. He finds external evidence that Ephrem the Syrian in the 4th century used spiritual marriage to interpret the text in question (Peters, 2002, pp. 211-224). However, he generally does not provide anything new.

It is helpful to use spiritual marriage to interpret the text properly, but it brings about new problems. First, if the man and the girl are already in a state of spiritual marriage, how can it be that “he behaves uncomely towards his virgin”? Any possible explanation is likely to be far-fetched (Fee, 2014, p. 351). Furthermore, if they are already in a state of spiritual marriage, it would be more appropriate for Paul to say “let them sleep together” rather than “let them marry (γαμείτωσαν).”

Secondly, the text does not mention or imply spiritual marriage here or anywhere in the context. Furthermore, there is no known custom of spiritual marriage in the 1st century; rather, the earliest text concerning it appears in the 2nd century. It is therefore an anachronism to apply the concept of spiritual marriage to 1 Corinthians 7:36. Achelis (1902) admits that there is a time gap between the text and the interpretation of spiritual marriage (p. 26). Roland H. A. Seboldt, who wrote a long paper on the topic, contends that St. Paul is talking about spiritual marriage, yet also admits that “the historical gap is great” (Seboldt, 1959, p. 189).

Last but not least, none of the early Greek and Latin church fathers, except for Ephrem the Syrian mentioned above, interpret 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 as referring to spiritual marriage, though there are sporadic mentions of it. From the second to the 4th century, some Christians identified Paul and the Corinthians as precursors of later forms of asceticism, but none mention spiritual marriage (Deming, 2004, p. 28).

If spiritual marriage is not a good interpretation for 1 Corinthians 7:36, then what about the other explanations?

Quasimarital Relationship or Sexual Partners

A quasimarital relationship refers to an engagement between a man and a woman, that is, a fiancé and a fiancée, who anticipate marriage unless unforeseen circumstances intervene. In what follows, I first consider the fiancé-fiancée reading of 1 Corinthians 7:36-38. I then briefly note a related scenario sometimes discussed in scholarship, namely a brother-in-law and a widowed sister-in-law after the death of the betrothed husband. Finally, I evaluate a recent proposal that Paul is addressing unmarried lovers or cohabitators in 1 Corinthians 7:36-38.

A Man and His Fiancée

To the best of my knowledge, the first to use the fiancé-fiancée concept to interpret 1 Corinthians 7:36 is Ambrosiaster, the writer of a commentary on the Pauline epistles. In his exegetical work on 1 Corinthians, he translates “παρθένον” (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, 1 Corinthians 7:36) as “betrothed” (Ambrosiaster, 2009, p. 157). In the 1940s, the revised standard version of the *New Testament* was published in the USA, and the scholars on the translation team also translated “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” as “his betrothed.” Before long, other scholars had come to support the interpretation of fiancé-fiancée, with William F. Beck being one of them. He argues that 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 does not refer to father and daughter, but to fiancé and fiancée (Beck, 1954, pp. 370-372). At the same time as Beck, the famous *New Testament* scholar Werner Georg Kümmel addressed the problem in more detail and concluded that the relationship between “τις” and “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” referred to fiancé and fiancée (Kümmel, 1954, pp. 275-295).

From then on, some Chinese Bible translators began to follow this trend, rendering “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” as “virgin girlfriend” (*Lu Zhen Zhong Translation*

Bible, 1970), “girlfriend” (*Worldwide Chinese Bible, New Testament*, 1976/2015) or “fiancée” (*Contemporary Chinese Version*, 2010).

However, the argument has never stopped. Bruce W. Winter (1998, pp. 71-89) analyzed the relevant words in contemporary Pauline epistles and found that the word “ὑπέρακμος” (1 Corinthians 7:36) should be translated as “full of sexual passion,” “θέλημα” (1 Corinthians 7:37) means “sexual desire” and “ανάγκη” (1 Corinthians 7:37) means sexual necessity. So he supports the interpretation of “man and his fiancée.”

He analyzed “Εἰ δέ τις ἀσχημονεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ νομίζει” (1 Corinthians 7:36a), and finds that “ἀσχημονεῖν” (unseemly) is the infinitive form of “ἀσχημονέω,” which is the cognate of “τὰ ἀσχήμονα” (the unpresentable parts) (1 Corinthians 12:23), of which the antonym is “εὐσχημοσύνην” (the presentable ones) (1 Corinthians 12:23). Accordingly, St. Paul also uses “τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην” to refer to homosexual intercourse (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Romans 1:27). Therefore, Winter believes that “ἀσχημονεῖν” (unseemly) has the connotation of sex, so the “τις” (somebody) must refer to the fiancé and cannot be the father (Winter, 1998, pp. 74-78).

Then what does it mean to say that “the fiancé behaves in an unseemly manner to his virgin (fiancée)”? Winter thinks that the fiancé might have committed fornication with prostitutes, or even committed adultery with a married woman (Winter, 1998, pp. 80-83).

Regarding the phrase “ἐὰν ᾗ ὑπέρακμος” (1 Corinthians 7:36b), Winter (1998) studied noncanonical texts and concluded that “ὑπέρακμος” has specific meanings in the semantic field of sexuality (p. 78). Therefore, the word “ὑπέρακμος” connotes that the man has a strong sexual desire and does not refer to a girl who is past the age of childhood. If Paul had been talking about an older woman, he would

have selected the better formulation of “παρακμή” (past one’s prime) instead of “ὑπέρακμος” (Winter, 1998, pp. 77-78).

Winter (1998) also discusses 1 Corinthians 7:37 from the perspective of linguistics (p. 85). External evidence shows that “ἀνάγκην” can refer to a “natural need” such as hunger, but it can also be a sexual reference. So “ἀνάγκην” can be understood as “has no sexual necessity.” Similarly, “θελήματος” in this context means “sexual desire,” hence “ἐξουσίαν δὲ ἔχει περὶ τοῦ ἰδίου θελήματος” is interpreted as “can control his sexual desire.” And these two words correspond to “ὑπέρακμος” of 1 Corinthians 7:36, all of which are related to sex. In view of this, Winter finds that 1 Corinthians 7:37 parallels 7:36, describing two sides of the same coin. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 7:38 is the conclusion of this perspective, as in Table 1 (Winter, 1998, p. 87).

Table 1

The Two Scenarios for the Fiancé

1 Corinthians 7:36	1 Corinthians 7:37
Criteria	
(a) If anyone thinks he is behaving inappropriately toward his betrothed	(a) The one standing steadfast in heart
(b) If he should be full of passion (ἐὰν ᾗ ὑπέρακμος)	(b) having no [sexual] necessity (μὴ ἔχων ἀνάγκην)
Consequence	
and thus it is bound to happen (καὶ οὕτως ὀφείλει γίνεσθαι)	and is having control over his own [sexual] desire
Resolution 7:38 so then (ὥστε)	
he must do what he wishes, is not sinning, they must marry	and he has determined this in his own heart to keep his own betrothed, he will do well.
Conclusion	
he who marries even (καὶ) he shall do well	he who refrains from marriage he shall do better.

Winter is believed to stand on the shoulders of Kümmel and others and to make further progress in interpreting the pericope with the understanding of fiancé-fiancée. Later, Garland (2003) agreed with Winter in his commentary on 1 Corinthians (pp. 340-341). Contemporary *New Testament* scholar Gordon D. Fee also tends to support the interpretation of “fiancé-fiancée,” though he is cautious in his language (Fee, 2014, pp. 350-355). Hurley (2000, pp. 7-31) compares Jewish engagement customs with 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 and draws the conclusion that this pericope refers to “fiancé-fiancée.” Hurley (2000) interprets “ὑπέρακμος” (1 Corinthians 7:36b) as stating that the fiancée has passed the age of marriage, which is worse than Winter’s in terms of context and logic.

The interpretation of fiancé-fiancée has some explanatory power, especially with 1 Corinthians 7:36 making it read smoothly. If “τις” refers to the fiancé in this sentence, the subject remains almost unchanged from the beginning to the end, and the sentence can be translated as “If anyone thinks he is acting inappropriately towards his betrothed, if he should be full of passion and thus it is bound to happen, he must do what he wishes, is not sinning, they must marry” according to Winter’s study.

However, the interpretation of fiancé-fiancée causes other problems. I will focus on the argumentation of Winter. First, Winter’s exegesis is inexact to the pericope. It is problematic for him to use cognates to support his viewpoint. Winter (1998) thinks that “ἀσχημονεῖν” has the connotation of sexuality on the grounds that many cognates of that word have the same implication. Based on this, he concludes that “τις” (somebody) in 1 Corinthians 7:36 does not refer to a father, as it is almost impossible for a father to behave sexually inappropriately towards his virgin (daughter). Winter’s argumentation has the flaw that “ἀσχημονεῖν” sometimes simply means inappropriate without the connotation of sexuality, as “εὐσχήμονας” (reputable, honorable) (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*,

1989, Acts 13:50, 17:12), “εὐσχημόνως” (properly) (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Romans 13:13, 1 Thessalonians 4:12). Even in 1 Corinthians there are similar examples such as “εὐπάρεδρον” (proper behavior) (1 Corinthians 7:35), “ἄσχημονεῖ” (ill-mannered, rude) (1 Corinthians 13:5), “εὐσχημόνως” (properly) (1 Corinthians 14:40), all of which are not sexual (Callan, 2016, p. 277). Further, it is also problematic for Winter to interpret “ὑπέρακμος” as “full of sexual passion.” Terrance Callan (2016) has checked the uses of this word in many materials that precede St. Paul and finds that none has the meaning of sexual passion. Therefore, he concludes that it probably means “past the age of puberty” (pp. 278-280).

Second, we cannot infer the relationship of the fiancé-fiancée from the context, since there is no modifying word to indicate that she is a betrothed virgin (Seboldt, 1959, p. 113). This hypothesis creates more problems than it solves.

Third, this interpretation also makes 7:37 difficult to resolve. If the man and the girl have already been engaged, then “τηρεῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον” should be translated as “to keep his own virgin” (as a fiancée). That is to say, the man must maintain the state of engagement, which is obviously unfair to the girl and her family. Does the girl agree with him? If not, what will the consequences be for the two engaged partners and their families?

This interpretation seems to encourage the fiancé not to marry, because he shall do better if he refrains from marriage (1 Corinthians 7:38). Yet, this goes against St. Paul’s previous advice: Each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband (1 Corinthians 7:2); if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. It is better to marry than to be in flames with passion (1 Corinthians 7:9).

Lastly, there is the issue of the meaning of “not behave properly with his virgin” (1 Corinthians 7:36a). Obviously, it is unusual for a man to call his fiancée

“his virgin” (Grosheide, 1953, p. 182). Another peculiarity appears in the next verse: If the man is not to marry the girl, but rather to keep her as a virgin, then she is no longer “his own virgin” (τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον); the relationship between them ends. Consequently, he has no more authority to “keep” the girl, since the girl’s family has the right to marry her to another man.

Brother of a Deceased Man and His Widowed Sister-in-Law

Levirate marriage, in which the brother of a deceased man marries his brother’s widow, prevailed in many areas of ancient Asia and Africa. The custom was accepted and carried out by Jews for many generations (Weisberg, 2009, pp. 1-5). The story of Tamar (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Genesis 38:1-11) and the story of Ruth and Boaz (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Ruth 4:1-13) feature reflections of Levirate marriage. Pauline churches were mainly composed of gentiles, but it is conceivable that they included some Jewish Christians. Crispus and his family, for example, came to believe in Jesus Christ (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Acts 18:8), and Sosthenes also converted to Christ from Judaism (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Acts 18:17).

Since there were therefore some Jewish Christians in Pauline churches, we cannot rule out the possibility that this passage refers to the brother of a deceased man marrying his brother’s widow. The word “παρθένος” occasionally refers to a widow rather than a woman who has never been married (Callan, 2016, pp. 270-272). A more specific situation may have occurred in which the woman’s fiancé died during her engagement but before they had cohabitated, leaving the engaged woman a true virgin. It is conceivable that members of St. Paul’s Corinthian church were influenced by certain Judaic practices and ideas (O’Rourke, 1958, p. 295). According to these Judaic practices, the brother of a deceased man is required to

marry the widow of his brother, after which her firstborn child succeeds in the name of the deceased brother (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Deuteronomy 25:5-6).

This situation and relationship are almost the same as that between the fiancé-fiancée except that the woman was first engaged (or married) to a deceased brother. In view of this, we shall not discuss it further.

Relationship Between Lovers

A relationship between lovers is a modern solution to 1 Corinthians 7:36-38, recently raised by Reidulf K. Molvaer. After careful exegesis and analysis, he argues that the possibilities of a father-daughter relationship, a fiancé-fiancée relationship, or a spiritual marriage are all problematic in interpreting the relevant text (Molvaer, 2004, pp. 45-59).

Molvaer does not agree with those exegetes who say that “he” in 7:36 refers to a father, stepfather, or guardian who has a girl of married age. He points out that if “she” is the subject of “ὑπέρακμος,” which could mean “going on in years, fully mature or past the blossom of youth,” it is odd that it is not the subject of any of the other verbs in verse 36. Furthermore, if a father forbade his daughter to marry, this would not be considered “improper” (1 Corinthians 7:37), nor would a father feel guilty for permitting his daughter to marry (1 Corinthians 7:38). Therefore, “acting improperly” in 7:36 does not refer to a father. If it did, then Paul would be encouraging a man to refuse to let his daughter marry (1 Corinthians 7:37), which is contrary to verses 7:2, 7, and 9 (Molvaer, 2004, p. 51). If a daughter wanted to marry, her father could have gone against her will and forbidden her to marry (Molvaer, 2004, pp. 53-55), but recommending this would not be consistent with Paul’s other advice.

The interpretation of fiancé-fiancée reads more logically from a grammatical perspective, but this interpretation also contradicts what St. Paul has said in 7:2, 7, and 9 (Molvaer, 2004, p. 51). Furthermore, the interpretation of spiritual marriage makes it difficult to explain the references to “past the bloom of youth” and “it has to be” (Molvaer, 2004, pp. 51-52).

Molvaer proposes that St. Paul is addressing the issue of a former unmarried cohabitation (not necessarily in combination with an engagement) prior to the conversion of the parties to Christianity and the question of whether the parties should continue this relationship. This would make 1 Corinthians 7:36 easy to understand: “If someone thinks that he is acting improperly towards his virgin and that his sexual feelings are beyond his control and must be, let him do as he wishes; he does not sin; let him marry” (Molvaer, 2004, p. 52). St. Paul advises that they should end the present improper relationship of unmarried cohabitation, because they have converted to Jesus Christ, but if the man is not able to control his strong sexual desire, he can continue the relationship within marriage. St. Paul allows this kind of relationship because he is making concessions to human needs (1 Corinthians 7:6) (Molvaer, 2004, p. 53).

Regarding the word “γαμίζω” in 7:36, although most commentators regard it as having the same meaning as “γαμέω” (marrying) (1 Corinthians 7:36), Molvaer does not agree. He argues that “γαμίζω” is a verb in continuous form, although the act of marriage (wedding) cannot be continuous in this sense. Thus, he thinks that this word refers to “a sexual relationship,” which can be continuous, lasting, repetitive and permanent. By this interpretation, if the man continues in unmarried cohabitation, he does well, but if he ends the relationship, he does better (1 Corinthians 7:38), which seems to be more logical in the context (Molvaer, 2004, p. 54).

Molvaer believes that his interpretation sheds much new light on 7:27, where “γυνή” should not be translated as “wife” but as “woman.” His understanding would be: “Are you bound to a woman (relationship of unmarried cohabitation)? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a woman? Do not seek a woman” (Molvaer, 2004, pp. 53-54). The word “γυνή” can refer to a wife or a woman. Given that the first half of Chapter 7 deals with the married (7:10) and the second half with the unmarried, St. Paul probably talks about unmarried cohabitation here (Molvaer, 2004, p. 52). Molvaer summarizes that interpreting this relationship as a “lover relationship” makes the pericope read more smoothly both grammatically and logically (Molvaer, 2004, pp. 53-55).

Molvaer’s interpretation is original, but is still open to discussion. On the one hand, it is questionable for him to interpret the phrase “his virgin” as referring to a lover in an unmarried cohabitation. Callan, who studied many materials predating the Corinthian epistles, posits that “παρθένος” can refer to a fiancée or a widow, but mostly refers to a daughter (Callan, 2016, pp. 270-276). Most church Fathers understand “παρθένος” as an unmarried daughter. Not a single source can be found that uses “παρθένος” to refer to a lover. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, St. Paul is unlikely to support the man and the woman continuing their relationship as an unmarried cohabitation. It was not a serious moral problem for contemporary Corinthians in general to live together before marriage, but in the opinion of St. Paul, it was against Christian ethics. Paul understands extramarital sex as fornication and states that those who commit fornication belong to the unrighteous and shall not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). Paul advises the man and woman to get married if they cannot control themselves, for it is better to marry than to burn (1 Corinthians 7:9). Reading between the lines, we find that Paul seems to regard marriage as a safeguard mechanism for preventing sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:2, 5, 9).

Interestingly enough, Molvaer (2004) quotes the passage “let each man remain in that condition in which he was called [1 Corinthians 7:20]” (p. 46) to support his argument. That is to say, according to Molvaer, the two were cohabitators or lovers before converting to Jesus Christ and they should continue as they used to be. Paul advises the Corinthians to keep their original identity as Jews, Gentiles, freemen or slaves, but would never advocate unmarried cohabitation. Paul’s advice is clear: They were subject to sin and darkness, but now they are washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and should not commit more sins (1 Corinthians 6:11-12).

Guardian and Ward

There are two possible situations in which the two people may be guardians and wards. The passage may refer to a male slave owner and his bondmaid, or to a father and his daughter.

A Male Slave Owner and His Bondmaid

Concerning the complexity of 1 Corinthians 7:36, O’Rourke proposes several hypotheses, including a *tutor* and his ward or *pupilla*, an adoptive parent and his adoptee, and a master with complete authority over his slaves under the law, among others. According to Roman law, persons in these types of vertical relationships were allowed to marry (O’Rourke, 1958, p. 297). It is thus possible, even probable, that St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 is talking about a Christian master and his virgin slave. The master had previously promised her that she may keep her virginity; now he finds that he wishes to marry her. This the apostle allows (O’Rourke, 1958, pp. 297-298). It fits well with the verb “γαμείτωσαν” (let them

marry) (1 Corinthians 7:36), which means that the master marries the virgin slave (O'Rourke, 1958, p. 298).

O'Rourke's interpretation, while logically coherent, fails to align with the contextual realities of Roman law. Under Roman legal frameworks, a relationship between a free man and a slave did not constitute a marriage but was instead classified as cohabitation (*contubernium*), which lacked formal legal recognition (Grubbs, 1995, p. 262). It was degrading for a free man to engage in cohabitation with a slave such that this kind of "mixed marriage" was more shameful than adultery (Evans-Grubbs, 1993, pp. 125-154). The Roman law applied in Corinth, since it was a colony of the Roman Empire in the 1st century. Taking this into account, it is unlikely that Paul would have recommended a "mixed marriage." On the one hand, Paul generally respects social regulations and legal orders, as reflected in the Epistle to Philemon. On the other hand, it is highly improbable that Paul would suggest a *contubernium*, which was not recognized by law. It would have been wise for Paul to keep his distance from such an affair lest he give the impression of having intervened where he should not. It would have been improper for him to engage in an affair related to honor and shame in Mediterranean culture (Malina, 2001, pp. 134-158).

Father and Daughter

If none of the possibilities discussed above is a perfect lens through which to interpret the text of 1 Corinthians 7:36-38, then what about a father/daughter relationship?

In this section, I would like to discuss the problems inherent in the father/daughter interpretation and deal with the problem from a perspective of text, context, and social context. In terms of the text, I will do some exegetical work on the three verses. Regarding the context, I will check the father-daughter

interpretation against the entirety of Chapter 7 to see if it agrees with Paul's teachings and theology, especially with regard to the theme of eschatology. Finally, the interpretation of father-daughter will be weighed to see whether it fits the social context of 1st-century Corinth as a Roman colony.

Close Reading of 1 Corinthians 7:36-38

The father-daughter interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:36-38 has significant historical precedent, as evidenced by early translations and commentaries. *The Latin Vulgate*, one of the oldest and most influential translations of the Bible, provides valuable insight into this interpretation. Translated by Jerome in the late 4th century, during the Roman Empire era, the Vulgate's temporal proximity to the original text potentially offers a more accurate understanding of the cultural context.

In the Vulgate, the key phrase in 1 Corinthians 7:36 is rendered as "*super virgine sua*," (Weber & Gryson, 2007, 1 Corinthians 7:36) which literally means "concerning his virgin," and verse 38 reads "*qui matrimonio iungit virginem suam bene facit*," (Weber & Gryson, 2007, 1 Corinthians 7:38) translating to "he who gives his virgin in marriage does well." This phrasing strongly suggests a father-daughter relationship, as it implies the subject has the authority to give the virgin in marriage, a role typically associated with a father in that cultural context.

Building on this historical interpretation, a close reading of the Greek text further supports the father-daughter understanding:

- In 1 Corinthians 7:36a, "τις" refers to a father, while "παρθένος" is understood as his virgin daughter.
- "ὑπέρακμος" (7:36b) means "beyond a high point," likely referring to the daughter reaching full puberty.
- "γαμείτωσαν" (7:36f) is the imperative present active third person plural of "γαμέω," meaning "let them marry."

Thus, 7:36 can be understood as: “But if someone thinks that he is acting inappropriately toward his virgin daughter, if she reaches her full puberty, and it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry.”

Paul then presents the alternative scenario in 1 Corinthians 7:37, “[n]evertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well” (*Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1769/2017, 1 Corinthians 7:37). Finally, 7:38 serves as a summary, “[s]o then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better” (*Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1769/2017, 1 Corinthians 7:38). However, this interpretation of father-daughter is not without challenges, as there are four main problems that need to be dealt with.

1. Contextual Ambiguity: The immediate context does not explicitly mention a father or a daughter, and virgin (παρθένος) (7:36) is not a synonym for daughter (θυγατήρ) either (Moffatt, 1938, p. 99). The text itself does not tell us whether the two are father/daughter, fiancé/fiancée, lovers or in a spiritual marriage; each of these interpretations comes from inference. Regarding Moffatt’s question, it is no longer a problem, as scholars have recently revealed that “παρθένος” and its cognates were used very often explicitly to designate daughters (Thiselton, 2000, pp. 270-276). Other evidence comes from John Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus, who both simply replace “παρθένος” with “θυγατήρ” in their commentaries (Kugelman, 1948, p. 65).

2. Semantic Concerns: It is unnatural to refer to “acting inappropriately” (ἄσχημονεῖν) (7:36) in the context of the father-daughter relationship, although there are such formulations (Peake, 1937, p. 839). Winter argues that “ἄσχημονεῖν” has the connotation of sexuality, making the father an unlikely subject (Winter, 1998, pp. 74-78). As discussed above, Winter is wrong to propose that the word “ἄσχημονεῖν” simply means “inappropriate” and does not have a connotation of

sexuality. In the father-daughter context, “acting inappropriately” likely refers to the father’s failure to arrange a suitable marriage for his daughter (Callan, 2016, p. 281).

Similarly, the phrase “not under pressure” (1 Corinthians 7:37) is sometimes also perplexing. In the father-daughter relationship, it means that the father is not under pressure, which means that there is no marriage agreement, and “the father is therefore able to take complete charge of what he wants to do and freely decide not to give away his daughter in marriage” (Loader, 2012, pp. 217-218). When applied to the fiancé-fiancée relationship, it means that the fiancé is “not under pressure.” What is the pressure on the fiancé? There may be a feasible explanation, but in the context it sounds unnatural, whatever it is.

3. The third problem is the frequent subject changing. If this passage refers to the relationship between father and daughter, the subject of the sentence changes several times, which makes the sentence awkward to read. This problem cannot be solved but can be explained through an empirical analysis. In this section, I will focus on the second protasis of the sentence (ἐὰν ἧ ὑπέρακμος) (1 Corinthians 7:36), which is the key issue of the problem. There are not many ἐὰν-clauses in Pauline letters. In some examples of this kind, the clause has its own subject that does not agree with that of the main sentence (e.g., 1 Corinthians 7:39; Romans, 7:2, 4), so that the reader can clearly see who is doing the action. Some of the ἐὰν-clauses have no subject of their own, yet the reader can see that the subject agrees with the main sentence (Romans, 14:23). Another example, “whenever he (or she) turns to (ἐὰν ἐπιστρέψῃ) the Lord, the veil is taken away” (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, 2 Corinthians 3:16), tells us that the subject must be somebody, as it cannot be the veil.

What is the subject of the ἐὰν-clause in 7:36, which has no subject of its own? The subject may be either the virgin, who is the most recently mentioned in the

preceding clause, or the man, the subject of the main sentence (Fee, 2014, p. 351). Here it is more reasonable to think that the daughter is the logical subject. This ἐὰν-clause acts as an attributive clause, modifying an antecedent virgin daughter, and the next clause “it must be so” is a supplementary note.

Another problem is that the meaning of “ὑπέρακμος” (1 Corinthians 7:36b) is difficult to determine. If it refers to a fiancé, it likely means a strong sexual desire. But what does it mean if it refers to a daughter? The word “ὑπέρακμος” is composed of two parts, “ὑπέρ + ἀκμή. ὑπέρ” means “over, above, great degree” and is the source of the English prefix “hyper-,” and “ακμος (ἀκμή)” means a point in time. Thus “ὑπέρακμος” means “sexually mature, or having reached the fullness of puberty.” In the rabbinic literature, “ὑπέρακμος” is usually used to express full mammary development (Ford, 1966, pp. 89-91). Paul, being a rabbi himself, is likely to choose the same wording as other rabbis for the same connotation. Paul here may allude to the Song of Songs: “[W]e have a little sister, and she has no breasts” (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, Song of Songs 8:8) (Chilton, 2004).⁵

4. Other debated issues are the meaning of “γαμείτωσαν” (7:36) and “γαμίζων” (7:38). “Let them marry” (γαμείτωσαν) (7:36) is a plural form, which could be interpreted as “[l]et the father and daughter get married.” If it means “let the girl marry her fiancé,” it should use a singular form as in “let her marry,” as the *New American Standard Bible* does. The problem with this is that it renders the plural verb into a singular form in English. Here according to Loader, “let them marry” must mean “let the girl marry her fiancé,” even though this interpretation

⁵ Even if 1 Corinthians was written by Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1), who is responsible for the choice of the wording, it does not matter much, as he is the leader of the synagogue, and probably knows most of the Hebrew *Bible*.

involves a third person, the fiancé of the girl, who is never mentioned before this and creates an abrupt change between subjects (Loader, 2012, p. 217). Similarly, “γαμίζων” in 7:38 is a transitive verb, which could also refer to the absurd situation of a father marrying his daughter. In Byzantine text type, copyists changed “γαμίζων” into “ἐκγαμίζων” (give in marriage) to avoid this misunderstanding.⁶ Why then does Paul use “γαμίζων” instead of “γαμέω” as in 7:36? The best answer is “for the sake of variety” (Fee, 2014, p. 354). Scholars find that the classical distinctions between the verbs -e and -iz broke down in the Koiné period. So it is with “γαμίζω” and “γαμέω” (Kittel, 1953, p. 646; Lietzmann, 1949, pp. 35-36; Moulton & Howard, 1929, pp. 409-410; Moulton & Milligan, 2004, p. 121).

Despite these challenges, the father-daughter interpretation remains compelling when considered in light of historical translations, cultural context, and careful linguistic analysis. This reading provides a coherent understanding of the passage within its broader context in 1 Corinthians and aligns with cultural norms of the time regarding a father’s authority over his unmarried daughter.

Interpretation in Context

From the exegetical analysis above, we can see that Paul’s opinion is that the father has the authority to give his daughter in marriage or to keep her at home as a virgin (1 Corinthians 7:36). He who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well (καλῶς), and he who does not give her in marriage will do better (κρεῖσσον) (1 Corinthians 7:38). Why and in what sense is it “better” for the father not to give her in marriage?

Generally speaking, almost all fathers at all times and in all cultures wish their daughters to marry and establish families of their own rather than wanting to keep

⁶ Byzantine text-type is not earlier than the 4th century (Aland et al., 2014, p. 452).

their girls at home as spinsters. Why would Paul give advice that is against this natural inclination of fathers? In Paul's ideology, celibacy is "better" than marriage (Clark, 1999, p. 232). This idea is expressed once again in 1 Corinthians 7. He wishes that all men were even as he himself (i.e., celibate, 1 Corinthians 7:7). To those who are unmarried, he wants them to be free from concern...to serve the Lord without distraction (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). According to Paul, widows are also happier if they remain as they are, which means not remarrying (1 Corinthians 7:40).

This kind of teaching from Paul has a strong connection with his theology of eschatology.⁷ He believed that Parousia would occur in his lifetime and that he and other living Christians would be "caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (*Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1989, 1 Thessalonians 4:17). It is generally agreed that 1 Thessalonians was written in 50 CE and that 1 Corinthians was composed five years later (Schnelle, 1998, p. 44). Pauline eschatology develops over time, but within a short period of five years, his ideas are unlikely to have changed drastically (Mearns, 1984, pp. 19-35). We can also see this in a comparison of the texts of 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians. The text of 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 is almost a repetition of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.⁸ Since Jesus's second coming will occur in his (their) lifetime, and since the form of this world is passing away (1 Corinthians 7:31), it is good for Christians to remain as they are (1 Corinthians 7:26)...those who have wives should be as if they had none (1 Corinthians 7:29). Thus, marriage is completely unnecessary and meaningless there and then.

⁷ Some of the people in the Corinthian church adopted a theology of over-realized eschatology, with which Paul disagreed. Paul's basic idea was that the eschatology is already but also not yet (Loader, 2012; Thiselton, 1978, pp. 510-526).

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 text: "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (*Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1769/2017, 15:51-52).

This is the Pauline eschatology of 1 Corinthians. The end is coming and it is appropriate for Christians to live by eschatological ethics. Christians are divided into two types: Those who remain celibate and those who marry. The first type is those with a gift for celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:7), while the other type consists of ordinary people without that gift, who have strong sexual desire and who most of the time cannot control themselves. Those in the latter group should get married (1 Corinthians 7:9) so that they do not fall into sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 7:2).

From the context of 1 Corinthians, we can also see that there existed a trend toward ascetic thought. However, Paul's advice against marriage was not based on an ascetic tendency, but rather on the practical difficulties of feeding a family during the famines (Instone-Brewer, 2001, p. 115). Paul is trying to spare them from troubles in the flesh by encouraging them to embrace celibacy (1 Corinthians 7:28). "Trouble in the flesh," according to Fee, can refer to "the present distress" (1 Corinthians 7:26), which means a real affliction in present life (Fee, 2014, p. 333). Other scholars generally agree that Paul has the unstated purpose of wanting to spare the Corinthians from the affliction that will result from having children in the last days (Gundry, 2016, pp. 141-168).

Combining these factors, we can summarize that Paul may have had several considerations in giving advice to fathers who had daughters ready to be married. First, he would have felt that it was unnecessary for Christians to marry just before the Parousia. Second, it was good for them to remain as they were through the present distress (1 Corinthians 7:26). Third, unmarried women and virgins are concerned with the things of the Lord and are holy both in body and in spirit (1 Corinthians 7:34). The fourth concern is that those who are unmarried are spared trouble in the flesh. Thus, a father who prevented his daughter from marrying may have done so out of his good intention to spare her from distress in the flesh. So a father's decision to keep his daughter from marriage could have been the most

reasonable and holy choice. Such a father would have been justified in saying that “it is for your good.”

Analysis From the Social Context

The father-daughter interpretation is also in conformity with Roman law and contemporary culture in the 1st century Mediterranean world. It should be noted that Corinth in the 1st century was not a Greek city with Greek culture, but rather a Roman colony with the official name *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis*. The Romans had burned the original city to the ground, killing all its men and selling its women and children into slavery in 146 B.C.E. (Shipley, 2000, pp. 384-385). After it was rebuilt in 44 B.C.E., Corinth was a large city with a population of 100,000 in Paul’s time, mainly composed of Romans, Greeks, and Jews (Wiseman, 1978, pp. 11-12). Temple E and the Julian Basilica of that time suggest that imperial cult activities were prevalent in Corinth (Vanderpool & Scotton, 2017, pp. 49-67; Walbank, 1989, pp. 385-386).

First, no one except the father had the authority to dispose of his daughter in marriage. His authority was conferred by Roman law, particularly *patria potestas* (the power of the father) (Crook, 1967, pp. 113-122; Gardner, 1998, pp. 6-104; Saller, 1997; Vial-Dumas, 2014, pp. 307-329). The ideals of Roman family law concerning the power of the father are evident from as early as the Twelve Table Laws (*Leges Duodecim Tabularum*) ca. 450 B.C.E., and lasted until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 C.E. (Nótári, 2013, pp. 32, 49). Under ancient Roman law, *patria potestas* was the central constitutive element of the Roman family, generating bonds and defining the limits of familiar property (Vial-Dumas, 2014, p. 320). It is evident that the father had the authority to make all arrangements for the marriage of his daughter or to keep her at home for a while. The father also had the duty to raise his children and to arrange marriages for his

daughters according to Roman law (Benke, 2012, pp. 288-289; Shelton, 1998, p. 17), but if a father believed that Parousia was at hand and that Jesus Christ was returning within a few years, as most of the 1st century Christians did, he may well have chosen to keep his daughter at home instead of giving her in marriage.

Second, from the perspective of the development of Roman law, the father-daughter interpretation also makes the most sense. An ancient Roman type of marriage was marriage *sine manu*, in which the wife remained under the legal control of her father (Colish, 1990, p. 383). This means that, after marriage, the legal status of the bride did not change with respect to property rights (Peradotto & Sullivan, 1984, p. 243). By Augustus, in fact, the alternative form, “manus-marriage,” had mostly disappeared (Looper-Friedman, 1987, pp. 281-296), and almost all Roman women remained under their fathers’ *potestas* after marriage (Van den Bergh, 2000, pp. 351-364; Grubbs, 2002, p. 21). At the turn of the 1st century, marriage *sine manu* prevailed in the Roman Empire. As such, it is clear that the father of the girl, not her suitor, had the authority to decide whether to allow his daughter to marry. The suitor would propose and the father of the girl would decide the matter. By Paul’s time, Corinth had been a Roman colony for more than 100 years, so it is conceivable that Roman law would have been firmly applied in that setting. As a missionary and a Roman citizen, Paul would not give suggestions contrary to the law.

Third, the father-daughter interpretation is also in accordance with contemporary social customs. In the ancient Mediterranean world, among Jews and Greeks, marriage was usually arranged between the two families, and therefore the opinion of the girl’s father was decisive (Trail, 2008, p. 305). In this culture, even the suitor had no voice in the marriage arrangement. If the man and the girl had already engaged before their relatives, the two families may have announced the engagement and exchanged gifts, engagement money, or cattle. In this case, both

families would lose face if the fiancé announced that he would not marry the girl to whom he was engaged. It is probable that his own family would exercise the power of the father to punish him and that the girl's family would make a protest. Thus, the fiancé-fiancée interpretation described above seems to be unrealistic in 1st-century Corinth.

Last but not least, all the Latin and Greek church Fathers, including John Chrysostom (1889, Homily 19.5), Theodoret of Cyrus (1859, 1 Corinthians 7:36), Epiphanius of Salamis (1997, 61.4.5-6), Augustine (1999, On Holy Virginitly 34), and Ambrosiaster (2009, p. 157), except Ephrem the Syrian, interpret 1 Corinthians 7:36 as referring to a father/daughter relationship (Kugelman, 1948, p. 64). The interpretation of the church Fathers has reference value. Not only were they immersed in Mediterranean culture, so they knew the practices of marriage better than we do, but they were also closer in time to the lifetime of St. Paul, resulting in fewer and less significant cultural and historical differences between them and the apostle.

Conclusion

In examining the relationship between “τις” and “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” in 1 Corinthians 7:36-38, scholars have proposed various interpretations, including spiritual marriage, quasimartial relationships, and guardianship relationships, particularly between a father and daughter. Each interpretation has its basis, but considering the text, context, and social background, interpreting “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” as a father-daughter relationship appears to be the most reasonable.

Firstly, the viewpoint of spiritual marriage, namely the *Virgines Subintroductae*, was once popular among scholars. However, applying a 3rd-century concept to a 1st-century text seems anachronistic, as the scripture itself does not mention or imply such a practice.

Secondly, the quasimarital relationship interpretations, including fiancé-fiancée or lovers' relationships, also face challenges in linguistic interpretation and consistency with Paul's thoughts. These interpretations sometimes appear to be forced readings of the scripture.

In contrast, understanding “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” as a daughter not only has textual support but also aligns with Paul's preferences for eschatological views and the celibate life expressed in 1 Corinthians. Moreover, this interpretation is consistent with the social context, Roman law, and the customs of 1st-century Corinth, which granted fathers the authority to decide on their daughters' marriages.

In summary, interpreting “τὴν παρθένον αὐτοῦ” as a father-daughter relationship not only provides a more reasonable interpretation of the passage itself but also deepens our understanding of Paul's teaching on marriage and celibacy in the context of eschatological expectation. This case demonstrates the importance of taking into account the textual context, contemporary background, and social customs in the process of biblical interpretation. Looking back at the issue of *Bible* translation mentioned at the beginning of this article, there is a need to reexamine and reevaluate the translation of this pericope (1 Corinthians 7:36-38) in most of the widely circulated English and Chinese *Bible* translations. Such a reconsideration will help us to understand and interpret the passage's original meaning more accurately.

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