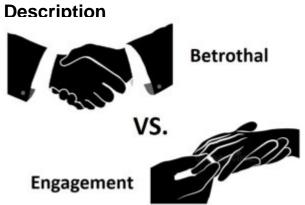# What is Betrothal in the Bible? Is it the Same as Modern Engagement?

Description

As something of a follow-up to my article on what a biblical concubine is (*an actual wife of lower status, usually a slave*) and my article showing that all sex outside of marriage is indeed wrong, this seemed like a logical place to go next.

Why?

Because some say that in Song of Solomon, the couple has sex outside of marriage and use that to argue that sex outside of marriage is morally permissible. However, quite apart from ignoring a mountain of passages on the topic, that's simply not possible if you understand what betrothal is. Most of the issue comes from thinking that ancient betrothal was like modern engagement, which it isn't. In fact, the two have almost nothing in common.

What is Modern Engagement?

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition, defines "engagement" thusly:

1. noun The action of engaging or the state of being engaged.
2. noun The condition of being in gear.
3. noun **A mutual promise to get married**.
4. noun The period during which this promise is kept.

5. noun A pledge or obligation.
6. noun A promise or agreement to be at a particular place at a particular time.
7. noun Employment, especially for a specified time.
8. noun A specific, often limited, period of employment.
9. noun A hostile encounter; a battle.

Definition #3 is the one we're after in this context. Modern engagement involves a man and a woman promising to marry one another. That's the essence and core of it. Notably, they both promise to marry each other and are not married until the wedding takes place.

However, betrothal is _radically_ different.

What is biblical betrothal?

Part of the reason for this article is there's no concise _and correct_ definition that _also_ shows up at/near the top of the search engines. (_At least for me; I have no idea what the algorithm serves up for others_) Thus, I will give a full and proper definition here and then support it biblically afterwards.

So here's the spoiler definition, with evidence to follow:

> Biblical betrothal occurs when a man goes to a girl's father and convinces him to give his daughter to the man as a wife, usually by paying a bride price. The moment the bride-price changes hands, the man and girl were considered married in a not-yet-consummated marriage. This state of an unconsummated marriage is called "betrothal", and it required a divorce to break it, because it was a true and genuine marriage.

Again, I'll support all of this biblically in a moment. First, please notice two things.

First, the couple was actually considered married, though it was a not-yet-consummated marriage.

Second, the girl had absolutely no say in the matter. None whatsoever. (_except perhaps by trying to convince her father_) This is one of the primary differences between modern engagement and biblical betrothal.

Now, onto the proof.

Proof that a betrothed woman was married

This is quite easy to demonstrate if you look at a passage in the Mosaic Law. I've included verse 22 for context, but it's verses 23 and 24 that weigh in on our topic today.

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Deuteronomy 22:22-24

22 "If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman, and the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

23 "If there is a **betrothed virgin**, and a man meets her in the city and lies with her,

24 then you shall bring them both out to the gate of that city, and you shall stone them to death with stones, the young woman because she did not cry for help though she was in the city, and the man because he violated his neighbor's **wife**. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

Please notice a few things about this passage.

First, The penalty for adultery is listed in verse 22, and that penalty is death. Notice that the penalty for having sex with another man's wife is exactly the same as the penalty for having sex with another man's betrothed.

> **Sidebar #1:** biblical "adultery" has a different definition than modern adultery. Biblical adultery only occurs when a man has sex with another man's wife. If a married man has sex with an unmarried woman, that's the very serious sin of fornication, but it's not biblical adultery. You can see my article on biblical adultery for the evidence.

> **Sidebar #2:** Biblically speaking, the penalty for adultery is always death. Now, some might cite the story of the woman caught in adultery, but remember that it doesn't appear in the manuscripts until many, many centuries after the gospels were written. Thus, it can't be scripture. Further, including this story introduces a major error into the Bible. I have an article on the woman caught in adultery with all the evidence.

Second, notice that in verse 23, we have the phrase "betrothed virgin". This is important because it establishes that the girl in question is betrothed _and also_ a virgin. Thus, the wedding ceremony and wedding night hadn't taken place yet.

Third, notice that in verse 24, the "betrothed virgin" is also called a **wife**. This passage establishes that a betrothed woman was considered a wife in an unconsummated marriage. We know she was a wife — and thus married — because of verse 24. We know that she was a virgin — and thus in an unconsummated marriage — from verse 23.

Thus, a betrothed woman is a wife in a not-yet-consummated marriage.

The passage above demonstrates this with perfect clarity. Now, we'll move on to proving the other aspects of betrothal in our definition.

Betrothal was between a man and the girl's father, and it usually included a "bride-price"

Now, this next passage establishes a couple of things. Please read it carefully.

Exodus 22:16-17

16 "If a man seduces a **virgin who is not betrothed** and lies with her, he shall give the **bride-price** for her and make her his wife.

17 If her **father** utterly refuses to **give** her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride-price for virgins.

The word translated "bride-price" in this passage is "?????" (*mahar, the verb form of mohar*.) The definitions of those words are as follows:

mahar: to acquire by paying a purchase price

mohar: purchase price (*of a wife*)

Here's a fuller, longer definition from BibleStudyTools.com:

mohar; i.e., price paid for a wife, Genesis 34:12 ; Exodus 22:17 ; 1 Samuel 18:25), a nuptial present; some gift, as a sum of money, which the bridegroom offers to the father of his bride as a satisfaction before he can receive her. Jacob had no dowry to give for his wife, but he gave his services (Genesis 29:18 ; 30:20 ; 34:12)

Notice the mention of Jacob, who worked instead of paying a bride price to convince Rachel's father to give Rachel to him in marriage. Money didn't need to change hands, but the father needed to be convinced to give his daughter in marriage to the man. The most common way that was done in biblical times was a bride-price (money). However, betrothal doesn't require a bride price (*despite it being common*), betrothal only requires the father giving his daughter in marriage to a man.

This is at the very center of betrothal: the groom going to the father to acquire the father's daughter as a wife. Without this element, it isn't a betrothal.

Period.

(*Well, sort of. There's one exception we'll look at in a minute.*)

Now, there's another thing to notice about the passage above, which is the use of the word "give" in the phrase: "*If her father utterly refuses to **give** her to him*". This is an excellent jumping-off point to talk about the typical "lingo" used in the Bible regarding betrothal.

This lingo is "giving and taking" in marriage.

Giving and taking in marriage

When betrothal is discussed in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, it often uses one of two phrases: It's typically either: "*give our daughters in marriage to them*" or "*take their daughters in marriage for us*". Jesus also uses the similar phrase "*marrying and giving in marriage.*"

Here are some examples:

Matthew 24:38 (*Jesus speaking*)

38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark

The word translated "giving in marriage" is the Greek word "???????" (gamisko), and here's a quick definition for it:

give in marriage.
From gamos; to espouse (a daughter to a husband) — give in marriage.

This particular definition doesn't mention the bride price, but a bride-price is usually a part of betrothal. Not always, but usually. Notice that the element of "giving" is just like Exodus 22:16-17 which we looked at in the previous section. This is the normal way that the Bible talks about it, especially in the Old Testament.

Here are some examples throughout the Old Testament and there are more, I simply truncated the list for brevity's sake.

Genesis 34:9

9 "Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves.

Deuteronomy 7:3 (*Moses giving God's commands to Israel before entering the promised land*)

3 Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons.

Jeremiah 29:6 (*about the captivity in Babylon*)

6 Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and **give your daughters to husbands**, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.

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The phrasing is consistent from before the flood right on up to Jesus' day.

- Daughters don't "marry"; they are "given in marriage" by their fathers
- Sons do marry; a son marries by "taking a wife" who has been given in marriage to him by her father

This custom survives up until this very day in ceremonial form, though not in practice. To this very day, the father "gives away" the bride at a wedding.

Sarah and Hagar, slaves and betrothal

Now, there's one exception to a father giving his daughter in marriage: when the girl in question was a slave.

Now, as is always the case when slavery in the Bible comes up, I want to make it clear that "slavery" in the Bible isn't what most Westerners think of these days. **It was entirely voluntary** and it effectively functioned as the Hebrew "bankruptcy system" so someone who was destitute wouldn't die of starvation or exposure. (*And yes, I realize I'm skipping all kinds of nuance and some exceptions, mostly because that's not this article's topic.*)

If you want more information on what *biblical* "slavery" was like, Mike Winger has a video on YouTube that does a pretty good job of giving an overview. I keep wanting to write an article on the topic that would go into more detail than he does, but my time is quite limited right now.

Anyway, here's the context as it regards betrothal.

Exodus 21:1-6

1 "Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them:

2 "If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall goout as a free man without payment.

3 "If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him.

4 "If his master **gives** him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone.

5 "But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,'

6 then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or thedoorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve himpermanently.

Notice, the owner of the slave had the authority to give one of his (*unmarried*) female slaves in marriage. This is what happened with Hagar:

Genesis 16:1-3

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.

2 So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

3 After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her **maid**, and **gave her to her husband** Abram as his wife.

The word translated "maid" in this passage is "????????" (shiphchah), which is defined as:

handmaiden, bondwoman, woman-servant
Feminine from an unused root meaning to spread out (as a family; see mishpachah); a female slave (as a member of the household) — (bond-, hand-)maid(-en, -servant), wench, bondwoman, womanservant.

The word gives an indication that Hagar was likely a slave without *technically* requiring it. The phrase " gave her to her husband" in verse 3 tells us that betrothal is in view. Thus, the only logical conclusionis that Hagar was a slave. This is further reinforced by Hagar's status as a concubine (*see my article on concubines for the evidence*). Concubines were almost always slave wives, again confirming that this passage is talking about betrothal.

Thus, the reason that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham was because Sarah owned Hagar as a slave, thus only Sarah could "give her in marriage", because Sarah was Hagar's owner.

It wasn't because Abraham needed Sarah's permission to marry another wife; it was because Hagar needed Sarah's permission to marry *anyone*.

Now we'll look at another major difference between betrothal and engagement: how it's contracted.

Betrothal vs. Engagement: vows

It wasn't possible for a virgin (*a never-married woman*) to enter into a modern engagement in the Old Testament because of some of God's commandments in the Mosaic Law. Modern engagement is a promise to get married between the bride and groom, and the marriage is contracted by the exchange of vows. However, in the Mosaic law, God gave the father the power to annul his daughter's vows.

> **Numbers 30:3-5**
>
> **3** "Also **if a woman makes a vow** to the LORD, and binds herself by an obligation in her father's house in her youth,
>
> **4** and her father hears her vow and her obligation by which she has bound herself, and her father says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand and every obligation by which she has bound herself shall stand.
>
> **5** "But **if her father should forbid her** on the day he hears of it, **none of her vows or her obligations** by which she has bound herself **shall stand**; and the LORD will forgive her because her father had forbidden her.

Thus, a woman couldn't marry a man via vows without her father's permission, because the father could simply annul the vow if he didn't approve of the match. Thus, a virgin (*a never-married woman*) couldn't get married via vows without her father's permission.

Again, engagement and betrothal are nothing alike.

In engagement, the woman promises to marry a man and the marriage is contracted via vows. In betrothal, the man marries the girl by convincing her father to "give her in marriage" to him, typically by a bride price, though a bride price isn't required.

The bride doesn't decide her groom

Now, the last important element is that the bride doesn't have a choice… sort of. If you have seen or read Jane Austen stories like Pride and Prejudice, they had a hybrid of betrothal and engagement where the father had to approve, but there was no bride price and they weren't married until the wedding ceremony. Notice that while the father had the final say, he certainly took his daughter's wishes into account. However, at the end of the day, the bride doesn't get to choose who she married.

One interesting point about this is related to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her father would've betrothed her to Joseph, meaning she didn't pick her husband, her father did. (*I think she would've been in favor of the marriage since both she and Joseph were regarded as righteous. More than likely, she wanted to marry him.*)

It's also interesting that if you read the account of the annunciation in Luke chapter 1, God doesn't seem to give Mary a choice either. The angel told her: "*Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son*". He told Mary what *would* happen, apparently without giving her a choice. Mary responded by accepting this after only a single question about how it would happen, which is a beautiful response.

(*Notably, her response in Luke 1:38 is literally: "Behold, the slave of the Lord". The Greek word there is "?????" ([doulé](#)), which means a female slave. Most translations have "servant", which isn't correct. The LSB gets it right though.*)

Song of Solomon and premarital sex

Some people who say that the Bible allows for sex outside of marriage try to appeal to Song of Solomon to support their position. Now, setting aside the vast mountain of other places where sex outside of marriage is clearly stated to be wrong (*[I have an article on that](#)*), remember that betrothal was an actual marriage. Yes, it's an unconsummated marriage, but it's an actual marriage.

The couple in Song of Songs was betrothed, and we know this because the Shulammite woman is repeatedly called a bride.

> **Song of Solomon 4:7-12**
>
> **7** "You are altogether beautiful, my darling,
> And there is no blemish in you.
>
> **8** "Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
> May you come with me from Lebanon.
> Journey down from the summit of Amana,

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From the summit of Senir and Hermon,
From the dens of lions,
From the mountains of leopards.

9 "You have made my heart beat faster, my sister, my bride;
You have made my heart beat faster with a single glance of your eyes,
With a single strand of your necklace.

10 "How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much better is your love than wine,
And the fragrance of your oils
Than all kinds of spices!

11 "Your lips, my bride, drip honey;
Honey and milk are under your tongue,
And the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

12 "A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
A rock garden locked, a spring sealed up.

Again, remember that modern engagement did not exist at that time. It was betrothal only. Therefore, the woman in question was _betrothed_ to Solomon and thus married to him. I would argue that all of the sexual contact took place after the wedding mentioned in 3:11

Song of Solomon 3:11

11 "Go forth, O daughters of Zion,
And gaze on King Solomon with the crown
With which his mother has crowned him
On the day of his wedding,
And on the day of his gladness of heart."

But even if the sexual contact happened before the wedding (_and I think the text clearly indicates that it didn't_), the Shulammite woman was Solomon's betrothed and thus his wife. If she was his wife, then obviously it wasn't sex outside of marriage.

So please, to those who keep saying that God approves of sex outside of marriage: stop! It's a horribly wicked sin that God promises to judge in many places, Hebrews 13:4 being one of many such clear verses. Stop promoting this destructive heresy!

Okay, stepping off the soap box now.

Other (_NT_) passages where betrothal is mentioned

While we're on the topic, we should look at the two other passages where betrothal is the focus. That's partially to avoid one of the mistakes mentioned in my article: The Biggest Mistakes Most People Make When Studying the Bible

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. That mistake is not taking **_all_** of the Bible's statements on a topic into account when looking into that topic.

The other, more important reason, is that one of these passages provides a direct repudiation and counter to the idea that God allows sex outside of marriage.

There are two other passages where betrothal is the focus, both in the New Testament. However, you'll never see them unless you have certain Bible translations.

Why?

Sadly, because of mistranslation. We'll look at them now with plenty of evidence.

The First Verse

Almost every popular modern Bible translation on the market **_intentionally_** mistranslates one of these verses. The NASB 95, the LSB, the NKJV, and the KJV don't, but basically all others mistranslate it intentionally. (_including the ESV, which intentionally mistranslates many passages; see the following link._)   Yes that's a huge claim, but the evidence is below and there's even more in my article on Bible translations.

This first passage is below from the correctly translated NASB 95, and you can double-check this in an interlinear bible.

> **1 Corinthians 7:36-38**
>
> **36** But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin _daughter_, if she is past her youth, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry .
>
> **37** But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well.
>
> **38** So then both he who **gives his own virgin _daughter_ in marriage** does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better.

Notice that we have "giving in marriage", which clearly means betrothal. The Greek is even clearer since the word translated "give in marriage" is the Greek word "???????" (gamisko) that we've already looked at from Matthew 24:38. (_The verse with Jesus talking about "marrying and giving in marriage"._)

Here's its definition again.

give in marriage.
From gamos; to espouse (a daughter to a husband) — give in marriage.

We've already seen that "giving in marriage" means betrothal. The translators clearly know this because they translate it correctly *literally* everywhere else. The word is used 8 times in the New Testament, 6 of them outside the passage above. (*You can confirm that here if you like.*)

Here are the 6 other places it's used in the ESV:

- **Matthew 22:30** For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.
- **Matthew 24:38** For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark,
- **Mark 12:25** For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.
- **Luke 17:27** They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.
- **Luke 20:34** And Jesus said to them, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage,
- **Luke 20:35** but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage,

Despite getting it correct everywhere else, here's how the ESV translates 1 Cor 7:38.

- **1 Corinthians 7:38** So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

Hmm, did you notice an inconsistency there?

"*One of these things is not like the others…*"

The ESV translators — and most other translators as well — clearly know what the word means because they accurately translate it in other passages, yet they *intentionally* mistranslated it here. I see no other explanation for their mistranslation of this verse. Thankfully, good translations like the NASB 95 and NKJV translate it accurately, but nearly all others mistranslate this verse.

For even more (*ironclad*) evidence that this verse is mistranslated, please see my article on Bible translations. (*The NIV and ESV actually mistranslate quite often; details in my article on Bible translations.*)

Now, we'll move on to the second verse.

The Second Verse

The second passage is also mistranslated in *almost* every translation, even the best ones, though much less intentionally. I don't ascribe intentional mistranslation in this verse like the previous one, but

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there's still mistranslation.

There are only two modern translations that even approach getting it right, one better than the other. But first, here's how the verse is usually **mis**translated:

> **1 Thess 4:4**
>
> **ESV:** that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor,
>
> **NKJV:** that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,
>
> **NASB 95:** that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor,

Again, those verses above are all mistranslated. Now, here's the first translation that gets this passage correct, though I should also say it's a poor translation overall.

> **1 Thess 4:3-8 (*RSV*)**
>
> **3** For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity;
>
> **4** that each one of you know how to **take a wife for himself** in holiness and honor,
>
> **5** not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God;
>
> **6** that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in **this** matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you.
>
> **7** For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness.
>
> **8** Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Yes, that's _radically_ different. (*We'll go through the Greek in a minute so you can see why this sense is accurate.*)

Now, the phrase "take a wife" is pretty accurately translated according to the sense of the verse, but that only helps if the reader is aware of betrothal and the "lingo" used for it. (*The "giving and taking in marriage" bit we've already covered*).

It's more literally translated in this next translation:

> **1 Thess 4:3-8 (*NAB*)**
>
> **3** This is the will of God, your holiness: that you refrain from immorality,

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4 that each of you know how to **acquire a wife for himself** in holiness and honor,

5 not in lustful passion as do the Gentiles who do not know God;

6 not to take advantage of or exploit a brother in **this** matter, for the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you before and solemnly affirmed.

7 For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness.

8 Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not a human being but God, who (also) gives his holy Spirit to you.

This is better and more literal.

We'll go through the Greek now, and you can double-check everything I'm about to say with an interlinear Bible here, and the associated commentaries on the verse here.

The word translated "wife" is "??????" (skeuos), and would be more literally translated "vessel". It's also used in 1 Peter 3:7.

1 Peter 3:7

7 Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the **wife**, as to the weaker **vessel**(skeuos), and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

Thus, the reference to wives is clear, and it's made more clear by the usage around that time: (*From "Barnes' Notes on the Bible" commentary on this verse*)

The word vessel also (Greek ??????? skeuos) was used by the latter Hebrews to denote a wife, as the vessel of her husband.

Instead of "wife" or "vessel", some translations have "body". However, as the Expositor's Greek Testament states:

(lit. "vessel") = "wife;" the rendering "body" (cf. Barn. vii. 3) conflicts with the normal meaning of **???????** ("get," "acquire;" **of marriage**, LXX. Ruth 4:10; Sir. 36:29, Xen., Symp., ii. 10).

Notice that this quote lists 3 examples at the end where this word is used of acquiring a wife via marriage. (*One Biblical, one apocryphal, and one other.*)

The Greek word "???????" (ktasthai) is the word mistranslated "possess" or "control". The RSV and especially the NAB get it right. Here's a definition from Thayer's Greek Lexicon:

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???????, ??????; future ???????? (Luke 21:19 L Tr WH); 1 aorist ?????????; (from Homer down); the Sept. for ?????; to acquire, get or prucure a thing for oneself (cf. Winer's Grammar, 260 (244)); (**perfect ????????, to possess** (cf. Winer's Grammar, 274 (257) note); **not found in the N. T.**): ??, Matthew 10:9; Acts 8:20; ??? ??????, all my income, Luke 18:12; with the genitive of price added (Winer's Grammar, 206 (194)), ??????, Acts 22:28; with ?? and the genitive of price (see ??, II. 4), Acts 1:18; ?? ?????? ?????? ?? ??????? ??? ????, to procure for himself his own vessel (i. e. for the satisfaction of the sexual passion; see ??????, 1) in sanctification and honor, i. e. **to marry a wife** (opposed to the use of a harlot; the words ?? ??????? ??? ???? are added to express completely the idea of marrying in contrast with the baseness of procuring a harlot as his 'vessel';

As the definition says, the word only means "to possess" when it's in the Greek perfect tense, but it's not found in the perfect tense anywhere in the entire New Testament, again as the lexicon says. Thus, "possess" or "control" is incorrect and "acquire" is far more correct and literal.

The Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary says this:

> how to possess his vessel—rather as Greek, "how to acquire (get for himself) his own vessel," that is, that each should have his own wife so as to avoid fornication (1Th 4:3; 1Co 7:2). The emphatical position of "his own" in the Greek, and the use of "vessel" for wife, in 1Pe 3:7, and in common Jewish phraseology, and the correct translation "acquire," all justify this rendering.

Now, the word translated "acquire" in this passage can mean "to purchase" as in a bride price in betrothal. However, it doesn't *require* the meaning of "purchase". The possibility is there, but it's not required. For example, here are some places where it clearly means "purchase":

Acts 1:18 (*Speaking of Judas*)

(Now this man purchased(ktasthai) a field with the wages of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.

Acts 8:20

But Peter said to him, "Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased(ktasthai) with money!

Acts 22:28

The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained(ktasthai) this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born *a citizen.*"

The word is only used 8 times, and in these three places, the idea of purchasing is clearly present. However, there are other places where the idea of purchasing is impossible, and the word more primarily means "to acquire".

Matthew 10:9

"Do not acquire(ktasthai) gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts,

The word "ktasthai" means "to acquire" with the _implication_ of purchasing, but it doesn't _require_ purchasing.

When read in context, the wife is acquired from the "brother" mentioned in verse 6. Obviously this isn't a _biological_ brother since marrying your brother's daughter (_your niece_) would be incest. Rather, this obviously refers to a Christian "brother". The other passages we've already seen indicate that the Christian brother in view is the girl's father.

Now, you might ask: "_If this verse is so clear, then why do nearly all modern Bible translations — including all the best ones — still mistranslate this verse?_"

That's a good question.

My guess would be cultural bias.

(_And notice, I don't ascribe ill-intent to the mistranslation of this verse as I do to the intentional mistranslation of 1 Cor 7:36-38. The 1 Cor 7 passage is impossible to misunderstand given the Greek words used, especially in verse 38._)

This verse is so radically counter-cultural in endorsing betrothal that it would be easy to think "_Well, there must be an exception to the word that means acquire/purchase_" and then to pull out the meaning of the word when it's in the perfect tense (_possess_), even though it's not in the perfect tense here. It's likely a result of the mental/emotional blind spots that we all have.

That leads neatly to what will probably be the most common objection to this verse when it's correctly translated.

"But that's just cultural!"

Actually, it isn't.

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First, this letter was written to the church at Thessalonica, which was a Greco-Roman city. I cover the evidence in my article: The Biggest Mistakes Most People Make When Studying the Bible, but 1st century Rome wasn't nearly as patriarchal as most Christians think it was. In fact, a woman could divorce her husband whenever she wanted, and she could do it *via messenger*. (*See the article for proof*) The early Roman Empire was indeed very patriarchal, but the latter Roman Empire wasn't, including when the New Testament was written.

Second, even if it was written to a patriarchal culture — and it wasn't — but even if it was, it wouldn't matter. God Himself gives the commands. Notice that verse 3 opens the passage by saying "This is the will of God", and the sentence doesn't end until the end of verse 6. This is clearly God's will, and to say otherwise is to blatantly contradict scripture.

Further, God attaches a warning to those who would reject this teaching.

God's warning

Now, God included a warning to those who would ignore this, which is clear if you read the verse in context. We will in a moment, but first we need to look at the word translated "disregard" in the RSV and NAB, which is "??????" (atheteó). It means:

> 114 atheté? (literally, a-thetos, "un-place") – properly, do away with; **reject what is already laid down**; to set aside (disregard as spurious); nullify, make void; to break faith (Abbott-Smith); remove out of an appointed (proper) place, i.e. reject as invalid; **refuse to respect** (even "**despise**"); to cancel, disannul, abrogate (passive, "be set aside" because perceived to lack value); to disregard, pass over (refuse to acknowledge).

Hmm, "disregard" seems a bit weak, doesn't it? **There's a reason that nearly every popular Bible translation translates this word as "reject" in this verse.** (*Which you can confirm here.*) The NAB doesn't, but no translation gets everything right.

So here's the passage in the NAB again, and notice verse 8.

1 Thess 4:3-8 (*NAB*)

3 This is the will of God, your holiness: that you refrain from immorality,

4 that each of you know how to **acquire a wife for himself** in holiness and honor,

5 not in lustful passion as do the Gentiles who do not know God;

6 not to take advantage of or exploit a brother in **this** matter, for the Lord is an avenger in **all** these things, as we told you before and solemnly affirmed.

7 For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness.

8 Therefore, whoever ~~disregards~~ **rejects** this, ~~disregards~~ **rejects** not a human being but God, who (also) gives his holy Spirit to you.

Thus, A Christian man is required to "acquire" his wife from "a brother" (*a Christian*). Taking into account the rest of the Bible — including 1 Cor 7:36-38, Exodus 22:16-17, and Numbers 30:3-5 — it would seem obvious that the "brother" mentioned here is the girl's father.

Thus, not asking a girl's father's permission to marry her is rejecting God according to verse 8. (*As is having sex outside of marriage; more on that in a moment.*)

No, I'm not kidding.

I don't see another way to take this passage *when correctly translated*. If you see another way, please mention it down in the comments section.

Now, some might say that Scripture is *only* saying that sex outside of marriage is wrong, but that's clearly not the case. Notice the phrase "*the Lord is an avenger in **all** these things*" in verse 6. It comes right after the requirement to get a (*Christian*) brother involved in acquiring a wife and thus applies to betrothal as well.

The warning is applied to both (1) sex outside of marriage, and (2) not getting permission to marry a (*Christian*) girl from her father.

If you have already married a woman over her father's objections or simply not asked, thankfully there's a solution for that:

1 John 1:9

9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The solution is to repent and ask God for forgiveness.

Some Application, #1

Since the impetus behind this article is showing that sex outside of marriage is wrong, this article would be incomplete without a further discussion of this passage. Please read it again, noticing how I've highlighted it differently.

1 Thess 4:3-8 (*NAB*)

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3 This is the will of God, your holiness: that you **refrain from immorality**,

4 that each of you know how to **acquire a wife for himself** in holiness and honor,

5 not in lustful passion as do the Gentiles who do not know God;

6 not to take advantage of or exploit a brother in this matter, for the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you before and solemnly affirmed.

7 For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness.

8 Therefore, whoever ~~disregards~~ **rejects** this, ~~disregards~~ **rejects** not a human being but God, who (also) gives his holy Spirit to you.

Notice that the explicitly stated will of God is for us to "refrain from immorality". The word translated "immorality" there is "???????" (porneia). Its definition boils down to all sex outside of marriage, especially prostitution. (*I go to great lengths to define it in my article: Yes, The Bible CLEARLY Says Sex Outside of Marriage is Wrong; see that article for lexical quotes, biblical quotes, and other evidence.*)

God's point in this passage is to contrast fornication/sex outside of marriage (*often paying a prostitute for sex in those days*) versus legitimately "acquiring" a wife.

The lexicon even touches on this while defining the word:

> to procure for himself his own vessel (i. e. for the satisfaction of the sexual passion; see ??????, 1) in sanctification and honor, i. e. **to marry a wife (opposed to the use of a harlot**; the words ?? ??????? ??? ???? are added to express completely the idea of marrying in contrast with the baseness of procuring a harlot as his 'vessel';
>
> Source.

To quote another passage, it's "*better to marry than to burn*" as 1 Cor 7:9 says. If you want to have sex, get married; otherwise, don't have sex.

Period.

Notice verse 8 again; God rejects a man who rejects this teaching.

If you think that you can freely have sex outside of marriage or hire a prostitute, God will reject you. If you have already done this, then the solution is what we've already covered: repent! Ask God for forgiveness and cease having sex outside of marriage because according to verse 7, "*God did not call us to impurity but to holiness*".

Again, if you reject this, you have rejected God.

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Some application #2

Here's the second application of this passage: If you are a Christian, you **_must_** get a woman's father's permission before marrying her.

Period.

This is not optional.

(*With a few exceptions from scripture; more on that in a minute.*)

I would like to remind you that rejecting this is rejecting God Himself according to 1 Thess 4:8. I'm sorry if you don't like this, but I didn't write it; God did. God even went so far as to call Himself an "avenger in **_all_** these things" in verse 6. This is a serious warning and thus should be taken seriously by Christians.

If you want to marry her, get her father's permission.

(*And never-married ladies, don't marry him unless he has gotten your father's permission. According to God's command, you don't have the final say; your father does. I'm sorry if you don't like this, but it's quite clear from scripture.*)

There are a couple of exceptions that are clear from scripture though; we'll look at those now.

Possible exceptions

There are five possible exceptions I can see to the requirement to ask a father for his daughter's hand. If you can think of another possible exception, drop a comment below.

- What if her father is dead?
- What if she's a widow?
- What if she's divorced?
- What if her father abandoned her?
- What if her father wants her to marry a non-Christian?

We'll work from the easy to the hard, and not all of these are clear.

What if her father is dead?

In this case, since it's not possible to ask him, I see no reason why the girl couldn't choose her own husband. This makes things pretty clear, so we'll move on.

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What if she's a widow?

This is clearly answered in scripture:

> **1 Corinthians 7:39** A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.

The phrase "only in the Lord", seems like a clear statement that the man she marries must be a Christian. With that as the only condition, she can choose.

What if she's divorced?

If the woman divorced her husband for a valid reason or was divorced by her husband, she can get remarried. If she divorced him without a valid reason, she can't remarry. (*see my article on divorce and remarriage for the scriptural support for this, as well as some nuance*). So assuming she can get remarried, then unfortunately, I don't see any clear scripture on this.

However, there is one slightly unclear scripture:

> **Deuteronomy 24:1-4**
>
> **1** "When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out from his house,
>
> **2** and she leaves his house and goes and **becomes** another man's wife,
>
> **3** and if the latter husband turns against her and writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies who took her to be his wife,
>
> **4** then her former husband who sent her away is not allowed to take her again to be his wife, since she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring sin on the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance.

The word "becomes" that I've highlighted is an active verb — indicating she did the action — so I would assume it's the same as when she is widowed, and thus she can marry whoever she wishes as long as he's a Christian.

What if her father abandoned her?

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This one is trickier. If you recall the Numbers 30 passage above, it says that the father can annul a vow she makes while "*in her father's house in her youth*". Thus, it seems like this wouldn't apply if her father had abandoned her. It would seem to me that she could marry who she wished since her father isn't around to ask.

What if her father wants her to marry a non-Christian?

This seems clearly answered by scripture:

> **2 Corinthians 6:14** Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

The application to marriage is clear because Jesus said:

> **Matthew 19:6** "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has **joined** together, let no man separate."

The word translated "joined" is "??????????" (suzeugnumi), and here's a lexical definition:

> 4801 syzeúgnymi (from 4862 /sýn, "identified with" and 2201 /zeúgos, "yoke") – properly, jointly-yoked; yoked (paired) together, when God joins two people together for one purpose (Mt 19:6; Mk 10:9).

> 4801 /syzeúgnymi ("closely-yoked") is only used for marriage in the NT – a union in which a husband and wife live better for the Lord together, than either would do alone.

> ["The word for 'joined together' means 'yoked together,' a common verb for marriage in ancient Greek" (WP, 1, 154).]

Thus, "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers" is certainly applicable to marriage. Additionally, it is also written:

> **Acts 5:29** But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.

If *any* authority figure commands you to disobey a direct command from God, you are required to obey God first. Thus, if a Christian woman's father wants her to marry an unbeliever, she has not only the *right* but also the *obligation* to disobey her father in order to obey God.

Conclusion

Modern engagement consists of a mutual promise between a man and a woman to get married, and the marriage is contracted by vows at the wedding. This was impossible in biblical times because a father could annul his daughter's vows according to Numbers chapter 30.

In contrast, betrothal is when a man goes to a woman's father and convinces him to "give her in marriage" to him, usually by paying a bride price (*though that's not required*). Once the agreement was struck, the girl was considered a wife to the man in a not-yet-consummated marriage. Betrothal required a divorce to break and the girl wasn't given a choice about her husband.

A female slave's master could give her in marriage, which is why Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife, because Sarah was Hagar's owner.

Importantly, because they were a betrothed couple and thus were actually married, Song of Solomon *cannot* be used to say that sex outside of marriage is permissible. That's assuming that the sexual contact didn't happen after the wedding, and the text seems clear that it does.

The New Testament reaffirms this by teaching in Thessalonians 4:3-8, saying that the proper remedy for a man who wants sex is to acquire a wife, and also that sex outside of marriage is **not** an option. Period. The passage then threatens that rejecting this is rejecting God Himself.

Thus, having sex outside of marriage is rejecting God Himself.

A secondary application of 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 is that Christians who want to marry are required to "acquire" a wife from a Christian brother. This means getting a woman's father's permission before marrying her if she has never been married. Rejecting this is also rejecting God according to the explicit testimony of 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

Yes, this is radically counter-cultural.

However, it also appears to be the Bible's clear teaching on the topic. You don't have to like it, but remember that God is God and you are not. He is the Potter, we are the clay. You might think the exegesis above is wrong and that's fine (*drop a comment below to explain precisely and specifically where it's wrong if you think it is*). However, absent an exegetical mistake on my part, the command is abundantly clear.

Jesus said "*If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.*" (*John 14:15*) This is one of His harder commandments because it requires us to be quite counter-cultural. That's when our obedience matters the most: when it's hard to obey.