

1 TIM 2:15: A POSSIBLE UNDERSTANDING OF A DIFFICULT TEXT

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"Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (RSV).

Surely 1 Tim 2:15 ranks among the most problematic of texts in the entire NT. The blatant chauvinism that it appears to reveal and express has prompted a wide range of interpreters to give it high marks for difficulty. "This is one of the most difficult verses of the New Testament to interpret," remarks Litfin.¹ The text "must rank among the most difficult expressions in the whole of the Pastorals," comments Guthrie.² David Scholer, in the context of pursuing some of the many issues surrounding feminist hermeneutics and evangelical values, describes the reference to salvation by childbearing in 1 Tim 2:15 as "notoriously difficult."³ There is no question that the passage raises numerous questions for the Biblical interpreter, all the more so in a contemporary climate where reevaluation of the roles of both men and women is taking place within society at large as well as within some sectors of the Church.

It will be my object to review how recent commentators have approached the text and to posit an apparently novel alternative that seeks to hear the point of 1 Tim 2:15 in the context of gnostic teaching. I shall do this by outlining what appear to be the prevailing interpretations of the text as represented by recent exegetes and then by reviewing apparent gnostic attitudes toward sexuality in general and childbearing in particular as illustrated in apocryphal NT works. I will then suggest that 1 Tim 2:15 may be understood to speak to those in Ephesus who had come in contact with and under the sway of erroneous gnostic teaching.

Lexically, two words are pivotal in understanding the verse. The first is *sōthēsetai*. In the synoptics *sōzō* is employed when saving faith has effected healing of the whole person. In the epistles it is used almost exclusively in reference to the saving activity of God, evinced by the use of *sōthēnai* earlier in 1 Tim 2:2.⁴ There is thus no escaping the conclusion

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¹ A. D. Litfin, "1 Timothy," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, Victor, 1986) 736.

² D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 14; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 77.

³ D. Scholer, "Feminist Hermeneutics and Evangelical Biblical Interpretation," *JETS* 30/4 (1987) 417.

⁴ See *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. C. Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3.214.

that the text is referring to the eternal salvation of women in its fullest NT sense.

The second word that merits comment is *teknogonias*, which most translators render as "bearing children" or "childbearing." The verbal form of the word appears later in 5:14. One manner of rendering *teknogonias* is "the birth of the child," which I will address subsequently. A minority viewpoint is to render it as "motherhood" or "childrearing" (NEB). This last possibility may be discarded, however, on the basis that had such been the focus of the text it is more likely that a term from the *teknotropheō* word group would have been employed, as in 5:10, instead of *teknogonias* here in 2:15.

So upon a first reading 1 Tim 2:15 seems to teach that childbearing is intended to be the instrument of women's salvation in conjunction with the other qualities enumerated in the second half of the verse.

Moo articulates a common reaction to the implications that such a reading holds: "Does v. 15 imply that women experience ultimate salvation only insofar as they beget children? Clearly such a conclusion is incompatible with Pauline teaching."⁵ No commentator that I could find supported the reading, even among those who distanced the text from Paul by positing non-Pauline authorship. The discontinuity with the rest of Paul's teachings is too great for anyone familiar with the Pauline corpus, whether we visualize the reader as living in the first, second or twentieth century. What about Christian women who never bear or raise a child? What about the vocation of lifelong chastity in singleness for women? Who would have attached in so direct a manner such an unusual condition to salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone? While the verse does lend itself to such an interpretation upon first reading, few exegetes are content to rest there. They quickly search for alternate possibilities.

One alternative, the above notwithstanding, is to attribute this text to non-Pauline sources, thus removing it from the realm of canonical authority:

Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:21-33; 1 Tim. 2:8-15; 5:3-16; Titus 2:3-5. I have grouped these passages together because, with the possible exception of Col. 3:18, none of them was written by Paul. They were all written by followers of Paul, at a later time (roughly A.D. 80-125), and addressed to situations different from those Paul faced.⁶

While I agree . . . that the NT passages supporting the principle of male dominance and female subordination have a common source or origin, I do not agree that this origin was apostolic. Rather, the passages in question were introduced in the post-apostolic period, within one particular "wing" of the Christian tradition, the "Paulist" wing, and are at direct variance with the clearly articulated views and practices of the Apostle Paul.⁷

Thus one large group of commentators feels no obligation to further pursue the text. They merely remove it from the rubric of apostolic compo-

⁵ D. Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11-15: Meaning and Significance," *Trinity Journal* 1/1 (1980) 72.

⁶ B. Hall, "Paul and Women," *TToday* 31/1 (1974) 50.

⁷ W. Walker, "The 'Theology of Woman's Place' and the 'Paulinist' Tradition," *Semeia* 28 (1983) 111.

sition. The Pauline authorship of the pastoral epistles in general and this text in particular is beyond the intended scope of this article. If removing the text from the apostle Paul is prompted by discontinuity between current cultural values and the perceived import of the text, it is my conviction that such is not necessary in the light of the hypothesis soon to be delineated. The merits of an exegetical methodology that permits redefinition of the textual canon on the basis of discontinuity with currently retained values is a question that likewise deserves its own treatment.

A second interpretive approach is to view the text as upholding in some manner the proper role that God intends for women. In other words, instead of directly connecting childbearing with salvation the text is understood to carry a more general message:

[Eve] was deceived by the serpent and transgressed. However, [woman] may be saved from falling into this error of usurping authority and thus being deceived by Satan, by keeping to the proper function for which she was made. Bearing children will save her from being tempted to "lord it over" the men. In this interpretation *sōzō* means being saved from falling into the error just spoken about and childbearing has its usual sense.⁸

For his part, Fee states simply: "More likely what Paul intends is that woman's salvation is to be found in her being a model, godly woman, known for her good works."⁹

In my judgment these two renderings under this general approach migrate too far from the lexical impact of the text. We need to ask how the Ephesians would have heard Paul's remarks. Such interpretations may indeed legitimately reside in our own minds, but would the Ephesians have heard the text in the same manner? Would they have understood *sōzō* to speak of the avoidance of Eve's original error? Would they have understood this text to simply uphold the model of godly womanhood? Both of these interpretations deflect the focus of 1 Tim 2:15 in such a manner as to make it unlikely that the Ephesians would have heard either of them. We need to consider yet other possibilities.

The third alternative most commonly encountered among contemporary commentators is to render *teknogonias* as "the childbearing" rather than the more general "childbearing," to see it as an allusion to the one birth that has had soteric significance for all—the birth of Jesus Christ. Spencer adopts this line of reasoning:

Paul closes this small section of his letter to Timothy reminding the male instructor(s) and reassuring the female student(s) that the salvation of the woman is never to be questioned (verse 15). The use of the singular article would suggest that "the child-bearing" refers to the one most significant child-bearing for Christians. It was through Eve that transgression entered this earth. It was through another woman, Mary, that salvation came.¹⁰

While many do not find this interpretation persuasive, it has the advantage of speaking to the context supplied by 2:12–14 in such a manner

⁸ S. Jebb, "A Suggested Interpretation of I Timothy 2:15," *ExpTim* 81/7 (1970) 221.

⁹ G. Fee, *I & II Timothy, Titus* (Good News Commentary; San Francisco: Harper, 1984) 38.

¹⁰ A. Spencer, "Eve at Ephesus," *JETS* 17/4 (1974) 220.

as to retain a redemptive and thoroughly Pauline meaning and intent. More than that, this approach retains the lexical impact of the verse in a manner that seems plausible for its original hearer(s). The interpretation is dependent, of course, upon the more focused meaning of *teknogonias* with the definite article. Those who demur from this interpretation do so because they regard that rendering as grammatically strained.

I suggest, however, that even this interpretation does not fully appreciate the theological and ethical possibilities in the context of Ephesus at the time. One more possibility exists, and that is that Paul is speaking to gnostic ideas that had infiltrated the minds of some of the believers in Ephesus. A comprehensive investigation seeking to document the presence of gnostic thinking in first-century Ephesus is needed in order to present this possibility in more definitive form than what can be offered here. Only the hypothesis will be outlined. Further research will be needed to establish it in an uncontested manner.

First, what indications do we have in the letter about the problems that prompted Paul's communiqué? Some members of the church were teaching different doctrine (1:3), occupying themselves with myths and genealogies (1:4), misapplying the law (1:7), rejecting conscience (1:19). In chap. 4 Paul speaks to those whose consciences are seared (4:2), who forbid marriage (4:3), and who enjoin abstinence from foods (4:3) as a reflection of those who depart from the faith in the latter times (4:1). Some gnostic teaching did indeed forbid marriage and retain a dim view of sexual relations. Whether 4:1-3 represents a specific allusion to gnostic influence in the Ephesian church is not clear because of the brevity of the reference. It does, however, raise the distinct possibility.

That a struggle did arise between gnosticism and orthodox Christian faith is well documented throughout the first and second centuries, most clearly in the form of apocryphal NT works that were excluded from the canon and the writings of the early apologists. In the apocryphal writings we catch a glimpse of gnostic attitudes toward sexuality that had been integrated into those groups that had pursued a synthesis of gnostic themes with the teachings of Jesus. The Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* represents but one illustration of this. Happily we now have access to the body of that work. For other works we are dependent on fragments or quotes from them in the writings of the early fathers.¹¹

A prominent theme in gnosticism was that the distinction between male and female was an error, that salvation lay in the dissolution of that distinction and the absorption of the two sexes into an androgynous unity.¹² Spirit is good; matter is evil. The goal of salvation is for spirit to free itself from the entanglement of matter. The dichotomy between spirit and matter led to two extremes: a pansexualism that was justified on the grounds that matter could not tarnish spirit on the one hand, and an asceticism that sought to amputate any affinity in the world of matter from spiritual experience on the other.

¹¹ See M. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924).

¹² See R. Grant, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1960) 80.

Such distortions in the latter category find expression in the *Gospel of Thomas* and in Clement of Alexandria's references to the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, among others:

Simon Peter says to them: "Let Mary go out from our midst, for women are not worthy of life!" Jesus says: "See, I will draw her so as to make her male so that she also may become a living spirit like you males. For every woman who has become male will enter the Kingdom of heaven."¹³

When the Lord was asked by someone when his kingdom would come, he said, "When the two will be one, and the outside like the inside, and the male with the female neither male nor female."¹⁴

Hippolytus describes the Naassenes as believing that primordial humans were androgynous, and they consequently rejected sexual intercourse (*Ref.* 5, 7, 39).¹⁵

What impact would such teaching have upon the notion of childbirth? "Women should refrain from bearing children, as Thomas makes clear when he combines Luke 11:27–28 with Luke 23:29 (Saying 79). Their only hope lies in their potential ability to become men."¹⁶ Especially instructive for our inquiry into the meaning of 1 Tim 2:15, however, is Clement's quote from the *Gospel of the Egyptians*:

Salome said, "How long will men die?"

The Lord replied, "As long as you women bring forth."

Salome replied, "I did well, then, by not bringing forth."

The Lord said, "Eat every plant, but do not eat the one which contains bitterness."

Salome asked when what she was inquiring about would be known.

The Lord said, "When you trample on the garment of shame, and when the two become one, and the male with the female neither male nor female."¹⁷

Thus we observe that childbearing, far from being a legitimate vocation for women, was viewed in gnosticism as the exact opposite. Indeed one can easily visualize a gnostic viewing the birth of a child as a sorrowful illustration of the main problem of life: Yet another soul has entered the world of matter. Now we observe that there is great distance between Ephesus and Egypt, where the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of the Egyptians* were most likely composed, and that there is also a time lag between the apostolic era and that of Clement of Alexandria (late second century). But if the *Gospel of the Egyptians* had been composed and gained enough of a hearing to warrant comment on Clement's part, if Origen (*Hom. 1 on Luke*) referred to the *Gospel of Thomas*,¹⁸ then it would be reasonable to hypothesize that similar gnostic themes were prevalent in the apostolic era even if they had not yet been synthesized or systematized in theological treatises of the stature of the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Gospel of the Egyptians*.

¹³ The concluding pericope of *Gos. Thom.*; cf. J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York: Viking, 1960) 370.

¹⁴ 2 *Clem.* 2:12; cf. Grant, *Secret* 79.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 37. See also James, *Apocryphal* 10–12.

¹⁸ See James, *Apocryphal* 14.

In short, I suggest that 1 Tim 2:15 is expressed in response to erroneous gnostic teaching in Ephesus to the effect that childbearing was an occasion for condemnation for Christian women. The sense of the text is that women will be saved in childbearing, not condemned, as long as they continue in faith. Paul's intent is to restore this womanly vocation to its rightful place in contrast to the manner in which it was depreciated in gnostic circles. He includes this concern along with the other different doctrines that are of concern to him in his communication with Timothy.

The immediacy of 2:15 with vv. 12-14 reinforces the plausibility of this interpretation. Paul has just reminded the Ephesians (through Timothy's instrumentality) that Eve was the first transgressor, not Adam, perhaps because Ephesian women were the ones who were so vociferous in misinterpreting the law (cf. 1:8). He has just dealt them a blow and issued a restriction (2:12). Now he wants to do the opposite. He does not want them to associate his observation about Eve with the deprecatory view that gnosticism held toward womanhood. He wants to restore childbearing as a valid vocation for women, perhaps in contradistinction to what those influenced by gnosticism in the Ephesian fellowship were saying. He also wants to distinguish himself from gnostic myths about creation that border on misogyny. Some gnostics' view of creation was that the male is identified with spirit (and is therefore good) whereas the female is identified with matter (and is therefore evil).¹⁹ From the Biblical perspective the creation of male and female was God's idea and is good.²⁰ God commended and blessed childbearing, which is an expression of his original and gracious intention and not an illustration and perpetuation of humanity's primary problem. Having pointed to Eve's culpability in the fall Paul now wants to limit just exactly how culpable womanhood is. Childbearing does not bring condemnation upon a woman. She will be saved through bearing children if she continues in the essential attributes of faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

In order for this reading to become definitive for 1 Tim 2:15, further research would need to document a significant gnostic presence in Ephesus during the apostolic era. But given the well-known proximity and intermingling of gnostic teaching in the Mediterranean region during the first century and the clashes with the Christian community in the second, such a possibility is more than conjectural.²¹ Given the manner in which it explains the exegetical issues resident in 1 Tim 2:15, it is at least appealing if not persuasive.

¹⁹ Doresse (*Secret 17-18*) quotes the following passage from the *Great Revelation* attributed to Simon Magus, a founder of gnosticism according to one gnostic myth, as contained in the *Philosophoumena* by Hippolytus of Rome: "Among the totality of the Aeons, two emanations there are that have neither beginning nor end. They sprang from the one and only root which is a power: the Silence invisible and incomprehensible. One of these is manifested on high, the Spirit of the All which governs everything; it is masculine. The other is from below; it is a great thought, feminine, which gives birth to all things."

²⁰ Gen 1:28.

²¹ See K. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1953) 123-125.