

KEPT SAFE THROUGH CHILDBEARING: MATERNAL MORTALITY, JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH, AND THE SOCIAL SETTING OF 1 TIMOTHY 2:15

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First Timothy 2:15 has been called “enigmatic,” a “great exegetical puzzle,” and even “one of the strangest verses in the NT.”¹ Less flattering epithets are also applied.² The riddle of this verse is the phrase σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας. Most modern versions translate this clause in line with the ESV, “Yet she will be saved through childbearing.”³ The NASB is virtually alone in interpreting σώζω in the non-salvific sense of being kept safe from harm: “But *women* shall be preserved through the bearing of children.” A third option is defended by, for example, Philip Payne: “But she shall be saved through *the childbirth*,” that is, the birth of the Messiah.⁴

As the title of this article indicates, I am going to argue that this puzzling phrase should be translated, “But she will be kept safe through the ordeal of childbearing.” In essence, I will be arguing that the most obvious sense of the words σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας is actually the intended sense of these words. By “most obvious,” however, I do not necessarily mean the most obvious sense to contemporary NT scholars, but the most obvious sense to first-century NT readers. I am going to make the daring claim that σώζω in 1 Tim 2:15 means what it normally meant in this period, and that τεκνογονία, likewise, means what it normally meant in this period. I will not attempt a comprehensive presentation and critique of the various views I will be interacting with, nor will I address every exegetical issue in this passage. My goal here is to concisely present my view, answer common objections, and offer a fresh trajectory of research. In addition to presenting original lexical evidence relating to the use of σώζω in Paul’s letters, I will also situate this text in the social context of the densely populated urban centers of the

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¹ Citing Simon Coupland, “Salvation through Childbearing? The Riddle of 1 Tim 2:15,” *ExpTim* 112 (2001) 302; L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (AB 35A; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 202; and W. D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000) 143, respectively.

² “Bizarre”: J. D. Quinn and W. C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 231; “preposterous”: E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936) 28; “fast unerträglich”: O. Michel, cited by Gottfried Holtz, *Die Pastoralbriefe* (Berlin: Evangelische, 1972) 71.

³ Cf. NIV (2010), TNIV, NJB, NLT, KJV, NRSV, HCSB, NET (“delivered,” though the notes explain this salvifically).

⁴ P. B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 417–21.

ancient Mediterranean world like Ephesus, where the recipients of this letter were located (1 Tim 1:3). That neglected context—critical for interpreting this verse—involved grinding poverty, widespread malnutrition, non-existent health care, and, predictably, staggering rates of maternal mortality. The interpretation that I will be advocating has been suggested before,⁵ but it has never been given a sufficiently adequate defense. In this article I hope to redress the balance.

I. ΣΩΩ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Most lexical surveys of σῶζω open with the basic observation that outside the NT the most common meaning of σῶζω is to preserve, keep safe, or rescue from physical harm.⁶ A virtual avalanche of literary and inscriptional evidence could be marshaled to support this conclusion, but this is hardly necessary since this much, at least, is not in dispute. Yet it is imperative to state this clearly at the outset so that contemporary readers of the Greek NT understand that the meaning of σῶζω being proposed here for 1 Tim 2:15 is not obscure or uncommon. In fact, it was the dominant meaning of σῶζω in this period. It was the way most people used this word and encountered this word most of the time. The salvific sense of σῶζω predominant in the NT is not the normal sense of the word in the first century, and we should be careful not to restrict the semantic domain of σῶζω and cognates to only the salvific sense more common in the NT. We need to remember that the semantic domains of the NT writers' vocabularies were drawn from the NT *world*, not the NT.

That said, non-salvific senses of σῶζω occur frequently enough in the NT. I have noted 37 clear occurrences, and this list may not be comprehensive.⁷ This usage is found in every NT writer, with the exception of Peter—assuming the common authorship of the Gospel of John, the Epistles of John, and Revelation. I am also including Paul among those who use σῶζω in one of its non-salvific senses, and that quite apart from 1 Tim 2:15. This is a somewhat contentious claim which I will defend shortly.

⁵ See C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963) 56–57; B. W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 109–10; C. S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson) 118–20.

⁶ For example, J. Schneider, “σῶζω,” *NIDNTT* 3:205: “In the first instance both the verb and the noun denote rescue and deliverance in the sense of averting some danger threatening life.” So too W. Foerster, “σῶζω,” *TDNT* 7:966; Ceslas Spicq, “σῶζω,” *TLNT* 3:344–45; A. Köstenberger, “Ascertaining Women's God-Ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15,” *BBR* 7 (1997) 124; B. Witherington, “Salvation and Health in Christian Antiquity: The Soteriology of Luke-Acts in its First-Century Setting,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. Howard Marshall and D. G. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 146–50.

⁷ Matthew: 8:25; 9:21–22 (3x); 14:30; 27:40; 27:42, 49; Mark: 3:4; 5:23, 28, 34; 6:56; 10:52; 13:20; 15:30, 31; Luke: 6:9; 8:36, 48, 50; 17:19; 18:42; 23:35–39 (4x); John: 11:12; 12:27; Acts: 4:9; 14:9; 27:20, 31; Hebrews 5:7; James 5:15; Jude 5; Paul: 1 Cor 3:15; 2 Tim 4:18 [1 Tim 2:15].

The context of σώζω, of course, is the decisive factor. Sometimes it is the historical context, the scene being depicted, which is determinative for the meaning of σώζω. For example, one might expect that the cry to Jesus, “Lord, save me!” would relate to salvation, not safety. But when the cry is found on the lips of Peter as he is sinking beneath the waves (Matt 14:30), that historical setting makes it clear that the cry is to be rescued from the rising swells. Similarly, to be “saved by faith” in Paul’s letters has a very different sense than it has in the healing scenes of the Gospels when Jesus tells the person just healed, “your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50), that is, made the sick person well. In other instances it is not the historical setting, but the literary context, or *simply the phrase attached to σώζω* which determines its sense. For example, when Jesus in Gethsemane pleads, “Father, save me *from this hour*” (John 12:27), his petition is clearly to be rescued from the painful agony of the crucifixion. Or when Jude speaks of Israel being “saved *out of Egypt*,” he means their physical rescue from a place of oppression (Jude 5). This much is straightforward, but one important point should not be missed: in every instance it is the experience from which one is “saved” that determines the sense of σώζω. To be “saved” from sin means something very different than to be “saved” from one’s enemies, or from harm, or from injury. In every context—*every* context—what one is delivered from defines the nature of the deliverance.

Such clear contextual indicators allow the writers of the NT to move back and forth between salvific and non-salvific senses of σώζω without any fear of being misunderstood. For example, in Acts 4 Peter defends his action of “saving” the crippled man (in the sense of healing him, 4:9), and virtually within the same breath goes on to say of Jesus that there is “no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” (4:12). Similarly, James refers to the prayer of faith which will “save” (in the sense of “heal”) the sick person in 5:15, and in 5:20 speaks of turning the sinner from sin and so “saving their soul from death.” In both passages, though the first occurrence of σώζω is clearly non-salvific and the second occurrence is clearly salvific, nobody is confused by this.

These are rather basic principles of hermeneutics, but they need to be stated explicitly because it is often argued that Paul’s prior or subsequent usage of σώζω in 1 Timothy is decisive for its meaning in 2:15.⁸ This is fallacious. Certainly the larger literary context needs to be considered carefully, but words can be used in different senses within the same context; in fact, it is rather common. In 1 Corinthians 11 κεφαλή means “authority” in verses 3 and 4, and “head” (the body part) in verses 4–7. In Romans 7 νόμος refers to the Torah throughout most of the chapter, yet in verse 23 it means “principle” or “controlling power.” In 1 Thessalonians 5 καθεύδω is used of moral laxity (v. 6), physical rest (v.7), and death (v.10). Many more examples could be given. However, establishing in principle that σώζω in 1 Tim 2:15 might have a different sense than it does elsewhere in 1 Timothy, or Paul’s letters,

⁸ Porter, for example, argues that in light of Paul’s use of σώζω elsewhere in the Pastoral Epistles, σωθήσεται in 2:15, “is virtually guaranteed a salvific sense” (Porter, “What Does it Mean to be ‘Saved by Childbirth’ [1 Timothy 2:15]?” *JNT* 49 [1993] 94).

does not prove much, since most NT scholars do not believe Paul ever uses $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ in a non-salvific sense. In what follows this consensus will be critically appraised.

II. $\Sigma\Omega\Omega$ IN PAUL'S LETTERS

Most NT scholars who have examined this issue and this text (1 Tim 2:15) believe that Paul only uses $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ in the sense of ultimate spiritual salvation.⁹ I am going to look at two instances in Paul's letters where $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ is fairly obviously used in one of its non-salvific senses, but I want to affirm at the outset that these are rare occurrences; Paul normally uses $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ in the very specific soteriological sense of rescue from sin and its eternal consequences. This is entirely in keeping with the subject matter of his letters: theological discourse involving gravely important spiritual matters. Of course, no one would argue that this was the only sense of the word that Paul knew. Luke, for example, has Paul using $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ in the sense of rescue from harm twice during the storm at sea (Acts 27:20, 31), and this represents one of the "we" passages, so it may reflect Paul's actual phraseology. Perhaps. But let us turn to Paul's own letters, beginning with the Pastoral Epistles themselves.

1. 2 *Timothy* 4:18. In 2 Tim 4:18, Paul says, "The Lord will rescue me ($\rho\acute{o}\upsilon\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$) from every evil deed and bring me safely into ($\sigma\acute{\omega}\sigma\epsilon\iota\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$) his heavenly kingdom" (ESV). What is unusual about this verse is the striking disconnect between contemporary NT commentaries and contemporary NT translations. Virtually every major translation of this verse (NIV, NASB, KJV, NLT, NJB, NET) renders $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ in line with the ESV, as an idiom relating to safety in travel. However, NT commentaries and scholars routinely reject this possibility because $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$, they argue, "always refers to salvation, in the theological sense, in Paul."¹⁰

It should first be observed that both Bauer (BDAG) and Liddell, Scott, and Jones (LSJ) confirm that when $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ is used with $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ indicating movement to a place, as in 2 Tim 4:18, the expression means to bring safely to a place or, in the passive, to come safely/escape to a place.¹¹ Both lexicons cite 2 Tim 4:18 as an illustration of this idiom and also list a number of extrabiblical examples of this construction. In order to confirm this analysis I conducted a TLG search, focusing on the two centuries before and after Christ. I also perused the inscriptions at the Packard Humanities Institute, with a broader range of dates. I found dozens of additional illustrations of this idiom and no examples where $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ plus a destination means anything else. In addition to the Septuagint, this stock expression is found in Josephus, Strabo, Appian, Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch, and others. In all these writers we find the construction $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ in conjunction with movement

⁹ See the list provided by Payne, *Man and Woman* 418, n. 8. There are exceptions, however. In addition to those noted in n. 6 above, see Köstenberger, "Ascertaining" 123–33.

¹⁰ D. J. Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority over Men? 1 Timothy 2:11–15," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991) 192.

¹¹ BDAG, " $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ " (10 d); LSJ, " $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ " (II 2). However, BDAG also cites 2 Tim 4:18 in reference to being saved from "transcendent danger" or "eternal death" (" $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$," 2α), referring the reader to the elaboration under " $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$."

toward a destination, and the meaning of the idiom is clear and consistent. It has nothing to do with spiritual salvation, but relates to safety in travel, transit, and the like: to make it safely from one place to another. This point is important enough to warrant citing a representative sampling of texts:

Gen 19:17

εἰς τὸ ὄρος σῶζου

Get safely to the mountains

1 Sam 27:1

καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν μοι ἀγαθόν ἔάν μὴ **σωθῶ εἰς γῆν ἀλλοφύλων**

And there is nothing better for me except to **make it safely to the land of the Gentiles**

2 Kgs 19:37

καὶ αὐτοὶ **ἐσώθησαν εἰς γῆν Ἀραρατ**

And they **made it safely to the land of Ararat**

Josephus, *Ap.* 2:21

ἀνεπαύσαντο **σωθέντες εἰς τὴν χώραν** τὴν νῦν Ἰουδαίαν λεγομένην

They rested, having **made it safely to the land** now called Judea)

Strabo, *Geogr.* 6.2.11

τοὺς δ' **εἰς Λιπάραν** μόλις **σῶσαι**

And these barely **made it safely to Lipara**

Plutarch, *Amat.* 772E

πρὸ τῆς ἐπιθέσεως **εἰς τὴν Κόρινθον ἐσώθησαν**

Before the attack they **made it safely to Corinth**

Appian, *Mithr.* 19

καὶ φεύγων αὐτος ἐπὶ τὸν Σαγγάριον ποταμὸν ... **ἔς [= εἰς] Πέργαμον ἐσώθη**

And fleeing on the Sangurius River ... **he made it safely to Pergamum**

Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 7.3

καταλειφθεὶς δὴ μόνος, οὐκ ἔχων **εἰς τίνα πόλιν σωθήσομαι**

Indeed I was left alone, not knowing **to what city I could make it safely**

Justinus Martyr, *Dial.* 56.20

εἰς τὸ ὄρος σῶζου μήποτε συμπαραληφθῆς

Get safely to the mountain, lest you be taken along with them

IG XII 7 386 [=Syll 255]¹²

σέσωισται τὰ αἰχμάλωτασώματα **εἰς ἰδίαν** ἀπαθῆ

The captives **made it safely to their own homes** unharmed

Many other texts could be cited, quite apart from those listed in LSJ and BDAG.¹³ Regardless of whether my proposal with respect to the use of σῶζω in 1

¹² This text is also cited by Moulton and Milligan as illustrative of the use of σῶζω in 2 Tim 4:18.

Tim 2:15 is deemed persuasive, it can no longer be maintained that Paul only uses σῶζω in the sense of ultimate eschatological vindication. The lexical evidence with respect to σῶζω εἰς in 2 Tim 4:18 is unambiguous and overwhelming.

However, it is not difficult to see why there is confusion on this point in reference to 2 Tim 4:18. In this verse we find this stock expression imbedded within a larger metaphor that relates to Paul's eternal destiny. Paul's destination is the heavenly kingdom, and the apostle is expressing his confidence that the Lord will bring him safely to that kingdom. Hence, BDAG suggests the translation "bring safely" for 2 Tim 4:18, albeit "in a pregnant sense." By way of analogy, I remember reading a sermon where the preacher said, "Jesus will *save you a seat* on the bus to heaven." The expression "save a seat," of course, has nothing to do with eternal salvation; it is a common idiom used in a variety of contexts meaning to reserve a place, and even when it is imbedded within this larger soteriological metaphor it does not lose its basic meaning, although used "in a pregnant sense." So, this reading of 2 Tim 4:18 sees ῥύομαι and σῶζω in this verse as synonyms, as they are throughout the Septuagint, and particularly in the Psalms, where precisely these kinds of sentiments are so commonly expressed: "Deliver me (ῥύομαι) from the lawless and save (σῶζω) me from the bloodthirsty" (Ps 58:3, LXX).¹⁴ In fact, Paul's phrasing and line of thought in 2 Tim 4:17–18 seems to have been influenced by Ps 7:2–3 or Ps 21:21–22 (as the critical apparatus of the UBS Greek NT suggests), where σῶζω and ῥύομαι are used synonymously, and in connection with rescue from the mouth of a lion:

Psalm 21:22–23 (LXX)	2 Tim 4:17–18
Rescue (ῥύομαι) me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! Save me (σῶζω) from the lion's mouth!	So I was rescued (ῥύομαι) from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue (ῥύομαι) me from every evil deed and bring me safely (σῶζω) into his heav- enly kingdom.

Although some commentators insist that Paul always distinguishes ῥύομαι from σῶζω,¹⁵ the truth is the words have significantly overlapping semantic domains. While Paul certainly prefers to use σῶζω of spiritual deliverance and ῥύομαι for physical deliverance, in addition to 2 Tim 4:18 the two words are indisputably

¹³ E.g. Polybius, *Hist.* 3.117.3; Posidonius, *Phil.* 13.177; 13.158, 183; 43.103; Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 2.48.4; 11.33.1; 14:109.5; Strabo, *Geogr.* 2.3.4 (2x =Posidonius, *Phil.* 13.158, 183); 4.1.13; 12.3.40; Plutarch, *Marcellus* 9.2; *Lucullus* 3.3; Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 1.10.88; ICI xix 5; IGLSyr 4.1812, plus several unclassified inscriptions from the Packard Humanities database.

¹⁴ See also Pss 6:5; 7:2; 21:9, 21–22; 30:2-3; 32:17–19; 33:5-7, 18-20; 36:40; 53:3, 9; 56:4–5; 59:7; 68:15; 70:2; 106:19–20; 107:7; cf. Job 6:23; 22:28–29; Isa 49:25; Ezek 14:18; Dan 3:88; Matt 27:42; Rom 11:26.

¹⁵ Payne, *Man and Woman* 418; Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988) 75; Ben Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians Volume 1: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006) 229; I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999) 469.

linked as synonyms in Rom 11:26: “And thus all Israel will be saved (σώζω), as it is written, “The Deliverer (ῥύομαι) will come from Zion.”” Moreover, in other passages Paul uses ῥύομαι where we would fully expect him to use σώζω if such a sharp distinction were valid: “Who will rescue (ῥύομαι) me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24); “He has rescued (ῥύομαι) us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his dearly loved son” (Col 1:13).

2. *1 Corinthians 3:15*. The second passage where σώζω is used in a non-salvific sense is 1 Corinthians 3:15. BDAG also discusses this verse and remarks that here σώζω is used to indicate rescue from harm and saved spiritually “at the same time.”¹⁶ This is an astute evaluation that requires a brief defense. In this passage Paul employs an extended metaphor of a master builder who selects only the choicest material (v. 10). A lesser builder uses inferior products, and when a fire strikes, his home is consumed, although the builder himself, “will escape (or “be saved”: σώζω), but as through fire” (3:15). In this statement, the conclusion to the metaphor (escaping through fire) is worded in such a way that it also perfectly expresses the application of the metaphor (saved, but barely); to make the application any more explicit would be redundant. Σωθήσεται διὰ πυρός in 3:15 is *intended* to be heard on two levels, as the climax of the metaphor (the foolish builder escaping through the billowing flames) and as its application (saved, albeit through dangerous circumstances).¹⁷ BDAG’s assessment is correct: the conclusion and the application of this parable are elegantly and efficiently merged into one statement.

Summarizing the discussion thus far, my goal has been simply to demonstrate that Paul, in keeping with other NT writers does, on occasion, use σώζω in one of its more common non-salvific senses, again, as the lexicons themselves tell us. The problem with accepting this meaning for 1 Tim 2:15 is candidly expressed by Marshall: “a reference to safety in childbirth is entirely unmotivated in the context.”¹⁸ Or perhaps the context has not been fully understood. There are two relevant contexts that need to be considered: the literary-theological context of Paul’s argument and, quite significantly here, the social-historical context of childbearing in antiquity.

III. THE LITERARY-THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY 2:15

Correctly tracing the line of thought from verse 14 to verse 15 of 1 Timothy 2 is critical to making sense of the statement, σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας. Most see the reference to Eve’s transgression in verse 14, and then the verb σώζω in verse 15 and conclude that the connection between the verses is trespass → salvation: although Eve transgressed, women can be saved through childbearing.¹⁹ The

¹⁶ BDAG “σώζω” 3; the lexicon also lists Rom 9:27 in this category.

¹⁷ Σώζω is used elsewhere of escape from fire (πῦρ): Jer 41:2–3; 45:18 (LXX); 4 Macc 10:13–14; Jude 23; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 2:58; Josephus, *Ant.* 10.214; 17.263–64; *1 En.* 102.1; *T. Ab.* 13.2; 1 Clem 11:1.

¹⁸ Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles* 469.

¹⁹ With most, I think the subject of the verb σωθήσεται is the main subject of this passage, the “woman” of verses 11–12, not Eve (v. 13). It may be true, as Payne argues (*Man and Woman* 420), that γύνη is not the most immediate antecedent, but it is certainly the most obvious antecedent; the future verb is impossible to explain otherwise. This interpretation is confirmed by the shift to the plural verb in

problem with this view is twofold. First, it cannot adequately account for the reference to childbirth in verse 15. What prompts Paul to abruptly bring up childbearing? According to some, the reference to childbirth is a figure of speech (a synecdoche) for women fulfilling their God-ordained roles in the domestic sphere,²⁰ or more broadly, “being a model, godly woman.”²¹ These interpreters see 2:15 as Paul’s antidote to the problem described in 2:12. A full assessment of this proposal will be offered below. For the moment it will suffice to note that advocates of the synecdoche interpretation are compelled to conjecture a meaning for τεκνογονία (childbearing) that the word never has anywhere else. The second problem, of course, is the theological conundrum of salvation by works, be it through bearing children, or being a godly woman. In order to alleviate this theological difficulty, some have postulated an implied object of σώζω, which is then interpreted non-salvifically as deliverance or preservation: “But she will be *delivered* [from Satan/false teaching] through childbearing/fulfilling her domestic role.”²² Not many have been persuaded by this hypothesis for the simple reason that it is difficult to imagine why Paul would not have included such an object if that is what he intended.²³ No one doubts that preservation from false teaching and Satanic schemes are a grave concern to the author, but there is a very common idiom in biblical and secular Greek to express the idea of “preservation from harm” using the verb σώζω. It involves either a following genitive (especially in non-biblical Greek), or a prepositional construction with ἐκ or ἀπό (usually ἐκ in biblical Greek). For example:

- Judg 2:16, “He *saved* them *from* (σώζω + ἐκ) the hand of those plundering them.”
- 1 Sam 9:16, “He will *save* my people *from* (σώζω + ἐκ) the hand of the Gentiles.”
- Ezra 8:22, “I was ashamed to ask the king for forces to *save* us *from* (σώζω + ἀπό) our enemies.”
- Matt 1:21, “And he will *save* his people *from* (σώζω + ἀπό) their sins.”
- Heb 5:7, “He offered prayers ... to the one who could *save* him *from* (σώζω + ἐκ) death.”

Without such a qualifying phrase delineating the danger from which one is rescued, this interpretation strikes most as implausible.

the next clause, “if they remain...,” which reflects the alternation between the generic plural “women” and the singular “woman” in verses 9–11. The transition back to the generic use of γύνη began already in verse 14.

²⁰ Thomas Schreiner, “An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15,” in *Women in the Church: An Analysis and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9–15* (ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Thomas J. Schreiner; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 117–18.

²¹ Fee, *1 Timothy* 75.

²² Variations of this view can be found in James Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 222–23; S. Jebb, “A Suggested Interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:12,” *ExpTim* 81 (1970) 221–22; and Köstenberger, “Ascertaining.”

²³ See the critical assessments of Fee, *1 Timothy* 75; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles* 469–70; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* 144; Schreiner, “Interpretation” 116, 227 n. 232; Porter, “Saved by Childbirth” 95; Jürgen-Roloff, *Der erste Brief an Timotheus* (EKKNT 15; Zürich: Benziger, 1988) 140–41.

Others—most notably Phillip Payne—conjecture that τεκνογονία must be something of a technical term referring to “the childbirth,” that is, the birth of the Messiah.²⁴ Once again, with this interpretation one must postulate a meaning for this word that is completely unattested. In the end, Payne finds it necessary to appeal to Paul’s “creative use of language” (twice) and speculate that Timothy would have understood this extremely cryptic reference.²⁵ Such special pleading, however, seems to tacitly acknowledge that if Paul meant what Payne thinks he meant by τεκνογονία, one would never know it from what the apostle wrote. Guthrie’s oft-cited critique of this interpretation bears repeating: “if that were the writer’s intention, he could hardly have chosen a more obscure or ambiguous way of saying it.”²⁶

Fortunately there is another option. One point of exegesis that everyone agrees on is that 2:15 represents some type of a positive qualification to the previous verses. Having restricted women in verse 2:9–12, and then referenced Eve’s deception and transgression in verse 14, “yet she will be saved/kept safe” in verse 15 seems to offer some kind of comfort or consolation. The question, then, is what could possibly prompt Paul to move from reflecting on Eve’s transgression in verse 14, to offering consolation related to childbearing in verse 15? The answer lies in the Genesis narrative itself; Paul’s epistolary logic is nothing more than the narrative development of Genesis. Eve’s storyline in Genesis 3 is transgression → curse: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth. In pain you will bring forth children.” Paul’s reference to Eve’s transgression brings to his mind the curse, the dangerous ordeal of childbearing, which he softens by reminding his readers—particularly his female readers—of God’s protection and care.²⁷ Paul even echoes the terminology of Gen 3:16, using a cognate noun, τεκνογονία, that perfectly summarizes the Septuagint’s τέξη τέκνα. On this reading, the function of the article with τεκνογονία is what grammarians call its “well known” use, where it refers to an object or event understood by both the writer and the audience, but which has not yet been explicitly mentioned. It is clear from the first reference to Adam and Eve in verse 13 that Paul assumes his readers are familiar with this story; the characters and events require no introduction, explanation, or background. In moving from Adam and Eve’s creation (v. 13), to Eve’s subsequent deception and transgression (v. 14), and then concluding with safety in childbirth (v. 15), Paul manifestly expects that his readers are tracking with him, so that we might reasonably paraphrase 2:15a, “Yet she will be kept safe through *this* (τῆς) ordeal of childbearing, the consequence of Eve’s transgression” On this reading of the passage, Paul’s line of thought unfolds as follows:

²⁴ Payne, *Man and Woman* 431–40; see also Witherington, *Letters and Homilies* 230–31.

²⁵ Payne, *Man and Woman* 438.

²⁶ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (INTC; 2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 89. Further critique is offered by Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* 145–46, and Marshall, who concludes, “this view can be safely rejected” (*Pastoral Epistles* 469).

²⁷ Others who recognize this connection include Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe* 71; Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy* 207.

- 2:8 Instruction relating to men praying
- 2:9–10 Instruction + prohibition relating to women’s adornment
- 2:11–12 Instruction + prohibition relating to women teaching in the assembly
 - 2:13 Rationale 1: Adam’s temporal priority in creation
 - 2:14 Rationale 2: Eve’s deception and transgression
- 2:15 Concluding affirmation/consolation related to childbearing

First Timothy 2:15, then, represents a positive qualification specifically prompted by the reference to Eve’s deception and transgression, but also aimed at mitigating the negative tone of the long string of restrictions directed toward women which began in 2:9.

IV. THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF 1 TIMOTHY 2:15

As noted earlier, the context is always the decisive factor in determining the meaning of a word or a phrase. Yet, the context of this verse extends beyond the words penned on the page; it also includes the world these words address. As a historian-exegete with an interest in the social setting of primitive Christianity, I am puzzled that so many NT scholars can look directly at the phrase σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας, and particularly the word τεκνογονία, “childbearing,” and yet conclude there is nothing in “the context” to indicate that σώζω might mean “keep safe.” Hence, my goal in this section is to establish the plausibility basis for the reading I am proposing; that is, to delineate those social and historical conditions that render this interpretation not only tenable, but probable. Certainly there are other important exegetical issues to discuss—e.g. the meaning of the διά-clause and the implications of the resulting promise—which I will take up later. But first, I want to look at the grim first-century reality of giving birth to a child in conditions that were very, very different from what I imagine most reading this article are familiar with.

1. *Establishing plausibility.* There are several legitimate approaches to establishing the plausibility basis of my reading of 1 Tim 2:15, “kept safe through the ordeal of childbearing.” I could continue in the manner I began this article, citing inscriptions and other literary evidence related to maternal mortality and morbidity in the Greco-Roman world—and there’s quite a lot of this. Yet, this would not get us far enough. Certainly no one doubts that women did, at least on occasion, die in childbirth, and so we would expect to hear echoes of this grief as we peruse the ancient sources. Another approach would be to cite the informed assessments of specialists. For example, a recent study of Roman funerary inscriptions observes that “child-birth is one of the most frequent causes for death” among Roman women.²⁸ Another scholar estimates that one in every 10 or 20 women in the Roman world died

²⁸ Maureen Carroll, *Spirits of the Dead: Roman Funerary Commemoration in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 153.

in childbirth.²⁹ Yet, while these are informed judgments by scholars immersed in the literary and archaeological record, it would be preferable to have careful data analysis that could result in reasonably firm statistics. Unfortunately, there was no Roman equivalent to the World Health Organization gathering this kind of data. However, we may not be at a complete impasse, because today we do have a WHO and other organizations monitoring maternal health. My proposal is to look at the firm data that we do have on similarly situated contemporary societies, that is, developing regions whose social, economic, medical circumstances approximate the situation of the Greco-Roman world. This is a well-established practice among social historians known as “demographic borrowing”—drawing meaningful analogies between societies that appear to be similar in salient respects, but where one is well documented and the other is not.³⁰ In particular, I want to highlight the difference between affluent, medically advantaged Western societies—where most of us live—and much of the rest of the world. For example, the reader may be surprised to learn that in 2005, a woman was 2,000 times more likely to die in childbirth in Sierra Leone than in Ireland.³¹ Coming to terms with this contemporary disparity is an important first step to understanding the ancient setting.

2. *Maternal mortality in the 21st century.* There is certainly no lack of data relating to contemporary maternal mortality and morbidity, as evidenced by the numerous studies published by development agencies such as WHO, UNICEF, and USAID.³² To keep this discussion manageable, I will focus only on maternal mortality, death in childbirth, leaving aside maternal morbidity and infant mortality. In spite of the abundance of reports, studies, and research, the current situation can be depicted succinctly, because all the data points uniformly to four key factors that invariably affect the rate at which women die in childbirth: poverty, nutrition, age at childbearing, and health-care access.

Organizations monitoring global health generally divide the world into developed and developing regions. Here are a few big-picture facts to orient us to the scale of the problem. Approximately 536,000 women die in childbirth every year.³³ More importantly, fully 99% of these deaths occur in developing countries; a minute one percent occurs in developed nations.³⁴ What this means—and consider

²⁹ Aline Rousselle, “Body Politics in Ancient Rome,” in *A History of Women in the West, Volume I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (ed. P. S. Schmitt; Cambridge, MA: Belcap/Harvard University Press, 2002) 298.

³⁰ Following Robert Woods’s definition in “Ancient and Early Modern Mortality: Experience and Understanding,” *Economic History Review* 60 (2007) 375. A complete description of the method, along with many relevant examples and a full bibliography can be found in Walter Scheidel, ed., *Debating Roman Demography* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

³¹ *Maternal Mortality in 2005: Estimates Developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and the World Bank* (Geneva: WHO, 2007) 29–33. The numbers vary slightly from year to year. For comparison, see the data compiled in *The United Nations Millennium Goals Indicators*, <http://mdgs.un.org>; data current to 2008.

³² I wish to express my thanks to Chanmi Kim, a policy analyst specializing in poverty reduction at the United Nations Development Programme, for her assistance in gathering data on global maternal mortality. Most of the reports referenced here can be accessed at the relevant UN and WHO websites.

³³ *Maternal Mortality* 1.

³⁴ World Health Report 2005: *Make Every Mother and Child Count* (Geneva: WHO, 2005) 61–62.

this carefully—is that maternal mortality is outside the orbit of our experience and concern. Most of us from North America and Europe—where the largest part of NT scholarship is produced—will know no one who has died in childbirth; most people in developing regions will. This is especially true in Africa, where a woman has a one in 26 chance of dying in childbirth, compared to one in 7,300 in developed countries.³⁵ These numbers, we must bear in mind, are only averages; in many developed countries, especially in Europe, the odds that a woman will die in childbirth are far slimmer than that. On the other end of the spectrum are countries such as Niger, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone, where one in seven or eight women die in childbirth.³⁶

Of course, “money is the answer to everything” (Eccl 10:19), and nowhere is this truism more true than when considering maternal mortality. The World Bank’s data on national and regional per capita income reveals a consistent inverse correlation between income level and maternal mortality rates.³⁷ So, lifetime estimates for maternal death in high-income regions is one in 6,700, whereas in low income nations it is one in 40.³⁸ As one would expect, per capita income directly impacts national health care expenditure, so that we also see a correlation between increased health care expenditure and decreased maternal mortality. For example, in Norway, where the national health care expenditure is \$4,080 per person, the lifetime maternal mortality risk is 1 in 7,400. In Gambia, where the national healthcare expenditure is \$33 per person, the lifetime maternal mortality risk is 1 in 32.³⁹

Another contributing factor to maternal mortality is child marriages.⁴⁰ This is a particularly pernicious issue for health agencies to address because so often it is the product of deeply engrained social patterns and long-held traditions. A young girl of 14 or 15, however, is not physiologically ready for the rigors of pregnancy and childbirth, and if she has grown up in an impoverished region and experienced extensive periods of malnutrition, her growth and physical development will likely have been stunted.⁴¹ Even here in the U.S., girls under 15 are twice as likely to die in childbirth compared to those older.⁴² In West and Central Africa, where 44% of women between 20 and 24 are married or in union before they are 18, and where

³⁵ *Maternal Mortality* 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 25.

³⁷ Based on correlating the World Bank’s data on per capita income (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>, accessed 8/16/11) with maternal mortality rates in *Maternal Mortality* 29–38.

³⁸ *Maternal Mortality* 37.

³⁹ Based on correlating the data in *World Health Statistics 2009* (WHO, 2009) 108–16, with statistics in *Maternal Mortality* 23–27. Similar data can found in *Human Development Report 2009*, published by United Nations Development Programme: <http://hdr.undp.org/en>.

⁴⁰ A child marriage is defined by UNICEF as marriage before the age of 18. A full presentation of global trends and statistics can be found in *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice: A Statistical Exploration* (UNICEF, 2006).

⁴¹ *Reduction of Maternal Mortality: A Joint WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF World Bank Statement* (Geneva: WHO, 1999) 16.

⁴² Cynthia J. Berg et al., “Pregnancy-Related Mortality in the United States, 1991–1997,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 101 (2003) 291.

some the world's highest rates of adolescent pregnancy are found, women are 470 times more likely to die as a result of pregnancy than in developed regions.⁴³

These kinds of dismal statistics could be multiplied *ad infinitum*, but that is hardly necessary. Here is the bottom line: severe poverty is horrific. If you are desperately poor and living in a region where everyone else is desperately poor, you live hand to mouth, you are likely malnourished, you get sick more often with little or no medical services to help, you die younger, and if you are a young woman who is pregnant, you pray hard to whatever god or goddess will hear you.

3. *The first-century setting.* As we correlate the four primary contributors to maternal mortality today—poverty, malnutrition, child marriage, and inadequate healthcare—with life in the ancient Mediterranean, what we see is a perfect storm of factors which almost certainly resulted in maternal mortality rates similar to what we see in today's developing regions. Whether they correspond to the appalling rates we find in places like Niger or Afghanistan, or just the terribly bleak rates of most developing countries is beyond the scope of this article to determine. Estimates of maternal mortality by modern demographers of ancient Greece and Rome range from 10% to 20%, depending on the method used.⁴⁴ My suspicion, however, is that figures near the upper range must be more accurate. After all, even in Niger there are at least some modern medical facilities; even in Afghanistan there are at least some healthcare professionals trained in modern medical practices; even in Sierra Leone there is at least some access to the contemporary body of medical knowledge, and at least some understanding of something as basic as germs. None of that was available in the first century.

A conservative estimate of the poverty rate in the Greco-Roman world is that 70% of the population lived at or below the poverty level.⁴⁵ Poverty and malnutrition, as we know, walk hand in hand. Demographers of the Roman world estimate that most girls were married by 15,⁴⁶ and the most recent study of this subject ar-

⁴³ Data on West and Central Africa available from UNICEF: <http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/overview.html>; accessed Aug. 24, 2011.

⁴⁴ Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Life: From Conception to Old Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) 65–66; Rousselle, “Body Politics” 298. On methodological cautions see the classic study by Keith Hopkins, “On the Probable Age Structure of the Roman Populations,” *Population Studies* 20 (1966) 245–64.

⁴⁵ E.g. Steven Friesen estimates that 68% lived at or below the subsistence level, with another 22% living “near subsistence” (“Poverty in Pauline Studies,” *JSNT* 26 [2004] 341, 347). Justin Meggitt, on the other hand, estimates that abject poverty was the lot of nearly 99% of the population (*Paul, Poverty and Survival* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998] 50). A concise summary of the present state of research is provided in chapter 3 of Bruce Longenecker's *Remembering the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁴⁶ Keith Hopkins argued that the median age at marriage for females was 15–16, with a substantial number marrying much younger (“The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage,” *Population Studies* 19 [1965] 309–27). T. G. Parkin suggests 14 was more common, though the upper class might have married somewhat later, perhaps in the late teens (*Demography and Roman Society* [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992] 123–25). This seems to be the working consensus: Beryl Rawson, “Adult-Child Relationships in Roman Society,” in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 27.

gues that 13 or 14 is more typical.⁴⁷ Moreover, this is a world in which stethoscopes and antibiotics were not even a fantasy that could be imagined. Without even a comprehension of germs, what would a young husband living in a one-room flat in Ephesus do when his wife seemed slow in recovering from delivering their child? He notices tissue redden, he sees inflammation set in and a fever develop; he runs to various shrines and temples pleading for mercy; perhaps he purchases an incantation and scrupulously enacts the ritual. In short, he prays to whatever god or goddess will hear him, as he watches his wife, in many instances, die.

None of this is controversial, so I will move on to objections to my interpretation and other exegetical matters. Before doing so, however, I think it is appropriate that we remind ourselves that the world in which the words σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας were originally written was a very different world than the one in which most of us live today. Ours is a world of HMOs, PPOs, Medicare, and a trillion dollar health care budget. The ancient world was one of poverty, malnutrition, disease, and overcrowded slums where the cries of women dying in childbirth could be heard virtually every day. Heard within this context, the words σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας might have a decidedly different nuance.

V. THE ΔΙΑ-CLAUSE

One of the more challenging issues for every interpretation of 1 Tim 2:15 involves the function of διὰ in the phrase διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας. There are two options. Either διὰ with the genitive indicates instrumentality: saved *by means of* childbearing,⁴⁸ or it indicates attendant circumstance: saved *in the circumstances of* childbearing, or kept safe *through the ordeal* of childbirth.⁴⁹ While διὰ plus the genitive indicating means is extremely common, the first interpretation leads to an impossibly un-Pauline reading: saved by means of childbirth. I will come back to this matter. Sensing this difficulty many interpreters argue that διὰ here indicates attendant circumstances, which BDAG also notes is “probably” the intended sense here.⁵⁰ This usage occurs frequently enough in Paul’s letters and elsewhere,⁵¹ but it is often objected that when used with σώζω, διὰ plus the genitive almost always indicates means, which is true: *almost* always. Let’s look more closely at the Pauline texts, summarized here:

⁴⁷ Arnold A. Leis et al., *The Age of Marriage in Ancient Rome* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2003) 103–25. Significantly, Walter Scheidel accepts their conclusions: “Population and Demography” (Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics, 2006, version 1.0) 6.

⁴⁸ Those favoring instrumentality include Payne, *Man and Woman* 425–27; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* 147; Schreiner, “Interpretation” 117–19.

⁴⁹ Those favoring attendant circumstances include Moo, “What Does it Mean?” 192; Roloff, *Timothy* 142; Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe* 71; Winter, *Roman Wives* 110; Marshall, *Pastoral Epistles* 470; C. F. D. Moule (cautiously), *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959) 56.

⁵⁰ BDAG “διά,” 10d.

⁵¹ E.g. Acts 1:3; 14:22; Rom 2:27; 4:11; 8:25; 14:20; 1 Cor 3:15; 16:3; 2 Cor 2:4; 3:11; 6:8; 2 Tim 2:2; 1 Thess 4:14; 1 Pet 3:20; Rev 21:24.

Σώζω διά+ Genitive in Paul

Instrumentality: Saved by means of ...		Attendant Circumstances: Preserved through difficulty	
Rom 5:8–9	Saved through <i>Christ's death</i>	1 Cor 3:15	Brought safely through <i>fire</i>
1 Cor 1:21	Saved through <i>the preaching of the cross</i>	[1 Tim 2:15	Kept safe through <i>childbirth</i>]
1 Cor 15:2	Saved through <i>the gospel</i>		
Eph 2:8	Saved through <i>faith</i>		
Titus 3:5	Saved through <i>the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit</i>		

Apart from 1 Tim 2:15, this construction occurs six other times in Paul's letters. In five instances it clearly indicates means. The reason we know this—and the *only* reason we know this—is because the phrase attached to σώζω διά makes its meaning obvious beyond doubt: saved by means of Christ's death, the cross, faith, etc. In one instance (excluding 1 Tim 2:15), this construction clearly indicates attendant circumstances, being preserved through a harrowing ordeal, 1 Cor 3:15.⁵² In this text (in keeping with our earlier discussion of σώζω in this verse), διά is doing double duty: at the level of the metaphor, it is a local use: passing through fire; at the level of the application, it indicates escaping through dangerous circumstances. Either way, we have διά plus the genitive to indicate being kept safe through a harrowing ordeal. Turning now to 1 Tim 2:15 we need to ask this question: does τεκνογονία, “childbearing,” denote a means of salvation, or a harrowing ordeal? The answer, I hope, is obvious: a harrowing ordeal. My point is that these half a dozen or so uses of σώζω διά plus the genitive have to be weighed, not simply counted. When we weigh them, that is, consider them carefully, we discover there is only one true parallel to 1 Tim 2:15, and that is 1 Cor 3:15; both indicate preservation through a life-threatening ordeal. Grammatically, this is an entirely appropriate reading of 1 Tim 2:15.

⁵² Payne, without explanation, disregards this usage because of the presence of ὡς (*Man and Woman* 424). There is no linguistic, semantic, or exegetical basis for excluding 1 Cor 3:15 from this discussion. Only one point is relevant: the διά-clause is the object of the verb σώζω. The adverb ὡς merely specifies the manner in which the “saving” takes place: “through fire.” Paul uses this construction when dealing with hypothetical situations (cf. 1 Cor 9:26; 1 Thess 5:2).

VI. 1 TIMOTHY 2:15 AS A PROVERBIAL PROMISE OF BLESSING

A very common—nearly ubiquitous—objection to my reading of 1 Tim 2:15 is that Christian women still die in childbirth. How can anyone argue that Paul is saying they won't? The exceptions seem to disallow this interpretation. One writer goes so far as to say that if Paul meant what I am saying he meant, 1 Tim 2:15 becomes "a false prophecy."⁵³ That is quite a charge. Let us examine the hermeneutics of this assessment, starting with an easy example. In Rom 13:3 Paul says, "For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong." I think everyone would agree that this is not true of any government entirely and, arguably, it seems mostly untrue of some governments. But we do not start scanning the ground for stones to hurl at Paul as we would a false prophet because we recognize this is not a prophecy, it is a proverbial maxim; a truism that remains true in spite of many exceptions. More difficult, however, are the numerous proverbial promises of blessing, like 1 Tim 2:15, which we find all throughout Scripture; promises of the generic variety, "God will be faithful to those who are faithful." Promises which, in their specific manifestations, routinely admit of many exceptions. For example:

- When Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt 6:33)—and by "things" he means food and clothing of the previous verses—what do we do when we read of Christians starving in Haiti, Somalia, or Ethiopia, or believers dying cold, hungry, and imprisoned by oppressive regimes?
- When Peter says, "If any would love life and see good days, he must keep his tongue from evil" (1 Pet 3:10), how do we reconcile this with the reality that there are many insolent mockers who enjoy a long, prosperous life?
- Similarly, Eph 6:2–3 promises that those who obey their parents "will enjoy a long and happy life." Yet history is full of examples of obedient children who were untimely ripped from this life through illness, war, famine, or some other tragedy.
- 1 John 5:14–15 promises that, "If we know he hears us, we know we have the requests that we have asked of him." Speaking personally, I am certain God hears me when I pray, but I do not have all the requests I have made—thankfully.
- James 5:13–15 assures us that if someone is sick we should "call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil, and the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well." Probably everyone reading this article has prayed for people, in faith, who have not been healed.

What should our response be to these supposedly clear promises—and many more could be added—that run counter to our daily experience? While we could conclude that these statements by Jesus, James, Peter, John, and Paul are "false prophecies," we would be wiser to employ a little hermeneutical common sense. These are not prophecies, but proverbial promises of blessing that admit of exceptions. And certainly each of these has many more exceptions than 1 Tim 2:15. If

⁵³ Payne, *Man and Woman* 423.

there were any doubts that 1 Tim 2:15 should be read as a proverbial expression of God's protection, Paul removes them with the very next words from his pen: πιστός ὁ λόγος, "This is a faithful saying" (3:1). In keeping with the most recent edition of the UBS and Nestle-Aland text, I think the "faithful saying" of 3:1 goes with what precedes, not with what follows. The "faithful saying" is the blessing pronounced in 2:15.⁵⁴ That judgment, however, is not particularly crucial for my argument. What is important, however, is to recognize that this promise of blessing is no more difficult than all the others, and only a rather philistine hermeneutic would demand 100% empirical validation of any of these. I am not saying that the gap between promise and reality is not difficult. It is. I am simply adding another verse to that already long list. In short, this is a very ill-considered objection.

VII. TEKNOΓΟΝΙΑ AS A SYNECDOCHE?

We are now in a position to address more fully the proposal that τεκνογονία might be used as a synecdoche to refer to a woman fulfilling her proper role in the domestic sphere. Moo, for example, appeals to 1 Tim 5:14 in order to expand the definition of τεκνογονία to include "child-rearing as well as child-bearing."⁵⁵ He argues that τεκνογονία "may represent, by *synecdoche*, the general scope of activities in which Christian women should be involved."⁵⁶ The Greek word τεκνογονία is found only here in the NT, and—excluding later Christian texts—in nine other writers.⁵⁷ Although the evidence is meager, each occurrence can be reasonably rendered "childbearing," as the lexicons confirm.⁵⁸ The attempt to read τεκνογονία as a synecdoche is problematic on several levels. From the standpoint of usage, a synecdoche is an easily recognizable, virtually transparent figure of speech in which the whole is represented in terms of its parts, or vice versa. Biblical literature provides an abundance of examples:

- Exod 17:8, "*Amalek* (= the Amelekite army) came and attacked Israel."

⁵⁴ So too L. T. Johnson, *First and Second Letters to Timothy* 203; Holtz, *Pastoralbriefe* 72.

⁵⁵ Douglas J. Moo, "1 Timothy 2:11–15: Meaning and Significance," *TrinJ* NS 1 (1980) 72.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ The following occurrences are discussed by Köstenberger ("Ascertaining" 140–41); Porter ("Saved by Childbirth" 96); and Payne (*Man and Woman* 431–33): Hippocrates (V BC), *Epistulae* 17.21; Aristotle (IV BC), *Hist. An.* 7.1.8 (528a, 28); Chrysippus (III BC), *Frag. Mor.* 611 [= Arius Didymus, *Epitome* 11b]; Galen (II AD), *Inst. Odor.* 49; Joannes Philoponus (VI AD), *Op. Mundi* 301; and Simplicius (VI AD), *Com. Epic. Ench.* 96. Two more should be added to this list: Antiochus of Athens (I BC–II AD), *Fragmenta*: "Quite the opposite of this, on the other hand, is true with respect to childbearing [πρὸς τεκνογονίαν]; if a woman conceives, she will miscarry; if she bears a child, it will die" (*Catalogus Codicum Astrologorum Graecorum*, Vol. VII [ed. F. Boll, Brussels: Lamertin 1908] 109, l. 18). Another text in this catalog is possibly late, but is referenced by BDAG ("τεκνογονία"): "And when Mercury is ascendant, [there will be] peace and the consorting of kings and authorities, and both their childbearing (τεκνογονίας τε αὐτῶν) and their fruitfulness is certain" (*CCAG* Vol. IX, p. 181, 17).

⁵⁸ LSJ defines τεκνογονία as "child-bearing," while BDAG renders it, "the bearing of children." There is some discussion as to whether "childbirth" is preferable to "childbearing" (Köstenberger, "Ascertaining" 140–42; Payne, *Man and Woman* 431–40). As far as my argument is concerned, this is distinction without a difference.

- Josh 10:40, “*Joshua* (= the Israelite army led by Joshua) defeated the whole land.”
- Ps 136:25, “He gives food to *all flesh* (= every living creature).”
- Prov 1:11, “We will lie in wait *for blood*” (= to kill someone by violence).
- Matt 16:17, “*Flesh and blood* (= a human source) did not reveal this to you.”
- Luke 2:38, “She spoke about the child to all who were waiting for the redemption of *Jerusalem*” (= the nation of Israel).
- Acts 1:22, “beginning from *the baptism* of John” (= the ministry of John).
- Rom 12:1, “Present *your bodies* (= your entire self) as a living sacrifice.”

As these selections illustrate, one essential quality of a synecdoche is that it is easily recognizable; frequently they are formulaic to the point of being cliché. This is certainly not the case with *τεκνογονία* in 1 Tim 2:15. If *τεκνογονία* is being used as a synecdoche, it is probably the most opaque and obscure example in biblical literature.

However, there is a more pressing problem with the synecdoche proposal: it is unnecessary. In this verse *τεκνογονία* is perfectly explicable in terms of its normal usage, particularly when connected with *σώζω*, understood in its most common sense: *kept safe through childbirth*. One cannot appeal to synecdoche simply as a means of avoiding the most obvious, and quite reasonable, sense of an expression in its context. Nor does 1 Tim 5:14 help in this regard. As Porter, Schreiner, and others have observed, in 1 Tim 5:14 the verbal cognate *τεκνογονέω* is carefully distinguished from marriage and household management: “It is to be noticed that the three words [*γαμεῖν, τεκνογονεῖν, οἰκοδεσποτεῖν*: to marry, to bear children, to manage a home] form a logical and conceptual continuum, in which marriage is differentiated from the bearing of children, which is differentiated from the managing of one’s household. It is difficult to see how ‘childbearing’ forms an inclusive term with household management or any other duties.”⁵⁹ Bullinger’s masterful study of biblical figures of speech provides 44 pages of examples and analysis of synecdoche in the Bible. Quite significantly, he includes a discussion of 1 Tim 2:15b as an example of heterosis (the plural verb for the singular), citing the entire verse, but says nothing of *τεκνογονία* in 2:15a as a synecdoche.⁶⁰ I can only conclude that if Paul had intended *τεκνογονία* as a synecdoche, it is extremely unlikely that his readers would have perceived it. On the other hand, if Paul wanted to say “kept safe through childbearing,” he chose a very obvious way of saying it: he employed the verb which most commonly means “keep safe,” and the noun which, everywhere else, means “childbearing.”

⁵⁹ Porter, “Saved by Childbirth” 96. See also Schreiner, *Interpretation* 117; Payne, *Man and Woman* 432. This observation also applies to the passage in Chrysippus (n. 56). Köstenberger suggests that the expression “marriage and childbirth” in this text may warrant a synecdochial reading of 1 Tim 2:15. However, the two activities are distinguished by Chrysippus, not summarized by the single term, *τεκνογονία*. Moreover, the association with “pain and death” in the following line indicates that childbirth specifically is in view, not domestic duties more broadly.

⁶⁰ E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (New York: E & J. B. Yong & Co., 1898) 595.

Finally, reading τεκνογονία as a synecdoche for raising and nurturing children seems particularly dubious in light of Paul's use of τεκνοτροφέω in 1 Tim 5:10, which means precisely *to raise and nurture children*. With this word group as a part of Paul's active vocabulary, there is little justification for expanding the semantic domain of τεκνογονία beyond its meaning attested elsewhere.

VIII. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH AND 1 TIMOTHY 2:15

I objected earlier to the reading, "saved by means of childbirth" as impossibly un-Pauline. Some, however, object to this objection because it seems to represent a theological bias; it dismisses an interpretive option simply because it conflicts with the doctrine of justification by faith. One writer remarks that this is mere "ideology" not "critical exegesis."⁶¹ I am completely sympathetic to this concern, which is why I used the expression, "un-Pauline." The mantra in my exegesis classes is, "follow the text wherever it leads and adjust your theology to fit the text." However, when as a historian and an exegete specializing in Pauline literature I balk at the rendering, "saved by means of childbirth," is that ideological prejudice or historiographical prudence? Is it methodologically unsound to ask, "How does this fit with what Paul says elsewhere?"

For example, one might be thumbing through Epictetus and pause where he says, "Why, if we had sense, would we be doing anything else, publicly and privately, other than praising God and rehearsing his benefits? Should not we, as we dig and eat, sing hymns of praise to God? 'Great is God that He has furnished us these tools! Great is God that he has given us hands!'" (1.16.15–17). On the basis of this text one might conclude that Epictetus was a monotheist—as long as you ignore virtually everything else Epictetus says. Similarly, one might be thumbing through the NT and pause at 1 Corinthians 8 where Paul says, "For even if there are so-called gods (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God" (vv. 5–6). From this text, one might conclude that Paul was a polytheist, but a monolater—someone who believed in many gods, but worshipped only one. One might draw this conclusion, as long as they ignore everything else Paul says on the subject. In other words, considering the larger context of a writer's thinking and worldview is hardly methodologically suspicious. And we should keep in mind that salvation by faith was not a minor, inconsequential matter for Paul. It was a hill he planted his flag on and, ultimately, died on. Is it possible that the same Paul who wrote Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Philippians, says here, "Women will be saved by childbearing/fulfilling their domestic calling"? No, it is not. In fact, if that is what this verse means, this would be the best evidence I can think of that Paul did not write this letter. That is not the conclusion of an ideologue, but a historian interpreting an ancient text according to proper historical method.

⁶¹ Porter, "Saved by Childbirth" 87; note also his concluding comments: "despite our best efforts to dismiss or obscure what the text says linguistically through ideologically or theologically dictated exegesis, the author of 1 Timothy apparently believed that for the woman who abides in faith, love and holiness, her salvation will come by the bearing of children" (p. 102).

IX. CONCLUSION

I noted earlier that sometimes it is the historical context that indicates the sense of a word, sometimes it is the immediate context, or sometimes it is simply the phrase attached to the word that dictates its meaning. Then again, sometimes it is all three. The social-historical context of high maternal mortality, together with the line of thought in this passage (Eve's transgression→safety in childbirth), the semantic range of *σώξω* as defined by the phrase attached to the word all combine to make Paul's meaning in 1 Tim 2:15 quite clear: God will be faithful to those who are faithful, and he will keep you safe even through this harrowing ordeal of childbirth. This verse need not be interpreted as the climax of the argument,⁶² but neither is it an afterthought. Rather, it is a fitting conclusion to a passage that has been largely restrictive and negative toward women, reminding them of God's provision and care.

One result of this reading of the text is that a fuller picture emerges of Paul. What we see is an apostle who is not only concerned about the inroads of false teaching in Ephesus, proper decorum in worship, and so on, but also an apostle who understands one of the deepest, most common fears of a woman's life, affecting, almost certainly, every woman who heard this letter read. I would submit that 1 Tim 2:15 is not a carefully nuanced polemic aimed at the false teachers in Ephesus.⁶³ Rather, it is a pastorally sensitive promise of God's faithfulness directed toward those who most needed to hear that word of hope; women like Arsinoe, whose lot "was hard and terrible," yet who lived and died with "great grace ... and beauty of spirit."⁶⁴

⁶² So Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives* 118.

⁶³ So, Schreiner, "Interpretation" 117–18; Moo, "What does it Mean?" 192.

⁶⁴ I wish to express my thanks to Biola University for providing a research leave to complete this article, to members of the Bible and NT faculty at Biola University for their helpful critique, and to my exceptionally gifted research assistant Hayoung Kim, who assisted me at every stage of the research.