

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Lost in translation: rethinking words about women in 1–2 Timothy

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## Abstract

St Paul and the tradition which follows in his wake have often fallen victim to the circumstances and ideologies of their interpreters: used as ambassadors for patriarchy by some and rejected as misogynistic by others. This article reviews some of the contentious passages in 1 and 2 Timothy and concludes that they both challenge the mores of their environment and resonate with other (deutero-)Pauline teachings. To ensure that such claims do not fall prey to circularity in their arguments, a methodology is developed and applied in which claims of resonance are not predicated on the content of other writings.

**Keywords:** ‘the Childbirth’; comparative interpretive methodology; 1 and 2 Timothy; widows; women teaching

St Paul has, in some circles, both critical and popular, earned a reputation for misogyny which seriously tarnishes his stature as a major figure in the emerging Christian movement. Even his apologists concede this, as the title of E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien’s *Paul Behaving Badly: Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?* suggests, and its content admits.<sup>1</sup> When attention turns to the Pastoral Epistles, particularly 1 and 2 Timothy, the chorus of complaint becomes louder.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, more critical eyes will introduce a distinction: that Paul was more enlightened than his reputation suggests, and that the strongly chauvinistic elements of his writing come from other hands.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the vexed question of Pauline authorship provides a Marcionite salvage operation for the apostle’s legacy in which the critic’s viewpoint essentially becomes a means of identifying whether a Pauline text is genuine or not. This is problematic not just because it privileges those texts or pericopes which the critic claims to be genuine, but also because it fails to recognise the complexities of pseudonymity in the ancient world. While the modern assumption is that pseudonymous literature is essentially fraudulent, the ancient world did not agree. The ancients knew six different types of pseudonymous writing:

<sup>1</sup>E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Paul Behaving Badly: Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup>Jay Twomey, *The Pastoral Epistles through the Centuries*. Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Karen Armstrong, *St Paul: The Apostle We Love to Hate* (Boston and New York: New Harvest and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), pp. 14–15.

- written by one's own hand
- dictated
- written with collaborators
- authorised by the named writer
- written 'as if' by a personality, or by a close colleague
- forgery.

Only the last was considered to betray or tarnish the legacy of the named writer.<sup>4</sup> Resolving the question of authorship as simply true or false might work for moderns (or post-moderns), but it is too blunt an instrument to deal with ancient practice. A better solution comes in Hanna Stettler's dismissal of a strict bifurcation of Pauline and deutero-Pauline considerations of mission, positing an over-arching tradition. In recognising the validity of Colossians as evidence for Pauline thinking and behaviour she comments:

It is legitimate to do so not only because the Epistle to the Colossians is part of the Pauline school of thought, but even more so because the whole issue of authenticity has never been conclusively decided in the negative. The letter probably stems from Paul himself or, if not, from an expert in Pauline theology. It presupposes Paul's understanding of missions and is to be interpreted in the light of Paul's other letters.<sup>5</sup>

Simply excising portions on the basis of authorship does not resolve the question either from this perspective or from that of canonical criticism – even for the more hotly contested Pastoral Epistles.<sup>6</sup>

Mention of canonical criticism allows us to anticipate a methodological issue which may arise from the exegetical material which follows. Without letting the cat out of the bag at this point, the reading of 1 and 2 Timothy which will be developed hereafter concludes by suggesting a convergence with other (undisputed) Pauline texts. As such, it might then appear to embrace a canonical approach in which agreement between canonical texts of the same or different traditions lends a degree of plausibility or justification to the conclusions found. This is not what is intended, and any such claims would indicate an over-reach regarding the precise relationships between the different texts within the Pauline tradition. That the readings which follow are valid because they agree with other material within the Pauline tradition rather than from their own content and context themselves would effectively place the locus of meaning outside these texts rather than within them. Any reading of 1 Timothy which effectively based its validity on an interpretation of, say, a text associated with Corinth would not be sustainable.

<sup>4</sup>Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), pp. 7–9.

<sup>5</sup>Hanna Stettler, 'An Interpretation of Colossians 1:24 in the Framework of Paul's Mission Theology', in Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein (eds), *Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 192.

<sup>6</sup>For more detailed accounts of canonical criticism, see James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984); Robert W. Wall and Eugene E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

It is surely better practice to locate meaning within the texts themselves. Instead, it is suggested that points of resonance, consonance or convergence do not indicate a causal relationship, say, that an undisputed Pauline document has directly influenced the content of these letters. This approach derives more from Jonathan Z. Smith's *Drudgery Divine* and his reflections on comparative approaches to religious traditions. Smith was highly critical of comparative methods which would demand links between different traditions, or even a cross-fertilisation of ideas. His preference was to see convergence as symptomatic of different traditions and schools of thought engaging with shared questions which arose from a common environment, not from a direct relationship or contact between them. In describing an effective comparative approach between Christianity and the other religious phenomena of late antiquity, he asks that scholars consider different religious phenomena as

*analogous processes*, responding to parallel kinds of religious situations rather than continuing to construct genealogical relations between them, whether it be expressed in terms of the former 'borrowing' from the latter, or, more recently, in an insistence on the reverse.<sup>7</sup>

This advice would appear to hold good even within a tradition like the Pauline, which includes roughly synchronous materials and situations. Rather than making claims for causal relationships or the derivation of one text from another, the remarks which follow work on the kind of comparisons identified famously in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as 'family resemblances',<sup>8</sup> which although described in familial terms, actually avoid genealogical claims. J. F. M. Hunter has given a more sociological account:

It is philosophically preferable to regard the family resemblance ideal ... as claiming that, having determined in other ways which objects belong to a given class, we will not necessarily find that they share one or more features, but will generally find that there is the kind of network of resemblances that there is often among the members of a family: A and B have similar eyes, B and C similar chins, A and C similar mannerisms, while perhaps D resembles B only in some way in which B resembles no other family members, and therefore there is no resemblance between A and D.<sup>9</sup>

When non-genealogical analogues are identified within its texts, the Pauline tradition may then be discerned from the resemblances which have emerged independently. It may then be further elaborated by Wittgenstein's corresponding description of a tradition or a trajectory as a thread.<sup>10</sup> In this picture, the different strands which make up the thread in its entirety have sufficient commonality to be identifiably part of the

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 112–13.

<sup>8</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 32e, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup>J. F. M. Hunter, *Understanding Wittgenstein: Studies of Philosophical Investigations*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), p. 59.

<sup>10</sup>Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 32e, p. 67. Cf. Aydan Turanlı, 'Wittgenstein on Myth, Ritual and Science' at <http://wab.uib.no/agora/tools/alws/collection-1-issue-1-article-68.annotate>; accessed 31 Oct. 2019.

whole, but remain distinct from each other, starting and ending at different points, and potentially never entwined together: 'the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres'.<sup>11</sup> It usefully illustrates Stettler's understanding of tradition.

From this starting point, it is worth revisiting the texts themselves to see whether they are as prejudiced as has been claimed, or whether the problematic interpretations originate not with the author, whether identified as Paul or as deuterio-Pauline scribes and associates involved in composition, but with the subsequent heirs of those traditions whose own purposes – which may have nothing to do with the texts, nor even the Pauline or deuterio-Pauline environments – were best-suited by the interpretations which fitted their own environments: what might be deemed ideological proof-texting and justification. For the purposes of this argument, attention turns to 1 Timothy 2:8–15, 3:11, 4:7, 5:4–16 and 2 Timothy 1:5, 3:6–9: texts which have loomed large in the subsequent debate about misogyny, with the potential to be distorted by both progressive and conservative commentators alike.

### 1 Timothy 2:8–15: silence and 'the childbearing'

1 Timothy 2:8–15 is sometimes cited as an example of misogyny. Even the vocabulary of the commands in this pericope (*boulomai*) is seen as hostile to women. However, Schottruff's conclusion that Paul's command is patriarchal or misogynistic ('women as women are still told [by whom?] what to do') bizarrely overlooks the fact that 1 Timothy 2:8, which tells men what to do, precedes the advice to women in 1 Timothy 2:9, and puts both sets of instructions on an equal footing.<sup>12</sup> So, too, does 1 Timothy 3:2.<sup>13</sup> There is no distinction in gender here. However the authoritative nature of the command is construed, it does not involve a distinction based on gender, and should not be cited as evidence for misogyny. Quite the contrary, these verses reveal that 1 Timothy has an 'equal opportunities' critic as its writer.

To be sure, 1 Timothy 2:11's English translation 'in silence with full submission' (NRSV) is deeply problematic, if not offensive; but the difficulties arise from the translation more than the text. The old Italian proverb, *traduttore traditore*, was never more apposite.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, 1 Timothy 2:11 is more progressive than it may first seem. Paul was not alone among the religious and philosophical traditions of the time in allowing women to learn, but this was still far from universal.<sup>15</sup> The NRSV's translation does not do justice to the Greek *hēsychia*, which is better rendered as 'quietness' or 'tranquility' than 'silence'. This suggests listening attentively and respectfully, not a gagging order. Elsewhere the New Testament writers demand that this same virtue be practised by men (Acts 22:2; 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:12; 1 Pet 3:4), so it is not a special requirement demanded uniquely of women. Today we might speak of it as an openness or readiness to learn which is a necessary attribute that a teacher, in any field of human

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Luise Schottruff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup>Paul S. Jeon, *1 Timothy: A Charge to God's Missional Household*, vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), p. 195.

<sup>14</sup>Marv Rubinstein, *21st Century American English Compendium: A Portable Guide to the Idiosyncracies, Subtleties, Technical Jargon, and Conventional Wisdom of American English*, 3rd edn (Rockville, MD: Schreiber, 2006), pp. 42–3.

<sup>15</sup>Nathan J. Barnes, *Reading 1 Corinthians with Philosophically Educated Women* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), pp. 65–120.

endeavour, hopes to find in a student or apprentice. While ‘submission’ has been used to demand submission to men, the focus here on prayer and God suggests that implies the wrong frame of reference. It is worth quoting Thomas C. Oden’s words in full:

The text says nothing at all about to whom women are to be attentive. It is a large leap of logic to assume here that women are to be submissive to men. To learn tranquillity with all attentiveness is to learn that tranquillity from God through humility. The obedience is to God, not to patriarchy.<sup>16</sup>

2 Timothy 2:12 records the author’s personal opinion (‘I permit’, NRSV). 1 Corinthians 7:25, 11:16 reveal differences of authority in teaching: personal remarks carry less weight than apostolic teaching, or what comes from the Lord. However, contrary to such a reading, this has sometimes been turned into a general commandment with more authority than intended. Oden again:

The intent seems to be this: I personally do not allow a woman to teach or claim inordinate authority (domineer, dictate, issue command to, lord it over, usurp, rule) over ‘the man’. It is not that women in general cannot teach but that a woman cannot teach in such a way as to usurp authority over teachers already duly designated.<sup>17</sup>

This implies a reading for a specific context, not a general, or universal, ordinance. Such a reading coheres at a number of points with the broader Pauline tradition and method:

- That women did exercise teaching roles within the congregations associated with Paul (Tit 2:3–4), as exemplified by Prisca (Acts 18:24–28; Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19), as well as Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2–3).
- That such teaching may well be aimed at preventing disorder that has arisen from specific circumstances rather than a general diktat (like 1 Cor 14:34–35).<sup>18</sup> Here it should be stressed that the two different situations reveal an *analogous process* (the concern to maintain order in worship),<sup>19</sup> not a genealogical dependence.
- That this is a matter of personal opinion rather than an apostolic or dominical command.

So, such resonances, arising from shared situations and analogous processes, make the readings given above part of a coherent and consistent pattern which is visible across the Pauline tradition, like the fibres in Wittgenstein’s thread.

There is more to be said concerning the syntax of this apostolic injunction. The two infinitive verbs (‘to teach and to have authority over a man’, NRSV) are particularly significant. The second verb (*authenthein*) has a rather more specific meaning than the NRSV’s translation indicates. It seems to indicate an authoritarian quality that seeks

<sup>16</sup>Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 97.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Linda Belleville et al., *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Hebrews* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), pp. 56–62; Jean Héring, *The First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Epworth Press, 1962), pp. 154–5; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1156.

<sup>19</sup>Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, p. 112.

to usurp or dominate, is found only once in the New Testament, and is the first occurrence in wider Greek literature where it appears in certain contexts with the connotations of force or violence. Cynthia Westfall gives an outline of the more recent scholarly debate on the meaning of the verb in the New Testament,<sup>20</sup> using also a later example from a complainant at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE who bemoans that he has been forced against his will into becoming a bishop.<sup>21</sup>

While commentaries have tended to assume the two verbs to be synonymous, both being variants on the idea of teaching (thus prohibiting women from teaching), there are two other possibilities for its meaning. One is that the text refers specifically to married couples, where the wife is not permitted to teach and therefore to usurp her husband's authority: 'I don't allow a wife to teach or to control her husband' (CEB). In this case, the injunction is not so much against women teaching in the assembly as against patriarchal structures of marriage that are called for in the 'household codes' of the Pauline corpus and 1 Peter. In the ancient context, wives were considerably younger than their husbands (often between eight and ten years; on average nine years in elite marriages),<sup>22</sup> significantly less educated and much less experienced in the public domain. In that context, it makes some sense for husbands to play a leadership role within the marriage and the family, especially as the household codes place love, respect and mutual self-giving at the heart of Christian marriage, which are themselves counter-cultural in the terms of the ancient world. It is not difficult to detect the difference between the tiered external structures of marriage in the Pauline writings and those of contemporary marriage with its equality between wife and husband in citizenship, level of education, age and life experience, the core principles remaining valid for marriage ancient or modern.<sup>23</sup>

The alternative translation for this text is that the reference is to women more broadly in the community. In that case, taking into account the distinctively negative tones of the second verb, it makes more sense to recognise the particular relationship each verb has to the other. If the first verb means 'teach' and the second means 'usurp authority', it is most likely to be an infinitive expressing purpose, in which the second clarifies the first, with the conjunction 'and' (*kai*) as explanatory: 'to teach so as to dominate'.<sup>24</sup> If this is so, the apostolic word does not condemn the female exercise of teaching authority but rather restricts it in a way that will prove beneficial to the community as a whole, to men and women alike. This translation makes most sense of the forceful second verb, giving the first verb clarification, which is otherwise difficult to decipher.

<sup>20</sup>Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), pp. 290–1, n. 32.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>22</sup>Respectively, Mary Harlow, 'Roman Society', in Edward Bispham (ed.), *Roman Europe* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), p. 115; Judith P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 235. However, actual demographics reveal complex data; see Roger S. Bagnall and Bruce W. Frier, who note a mean gap of 7.5 years in their *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), pp. 118–21.

<sup>23</sup>F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §§390, 442[9]; Gordon D. Fee, 'The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18–6:9', *Priscilla Papers* 16 (2002), pp. 5–7.

<sup>24</sup>Kevin Giles, *What the Bible Actually Teaches on Women* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), pp. 122–5, 144–51.

1 Timothy's stated preference, in other words, is that women do not teach in a way that usurps the authority of men which is, in any case, 'inconsistent with Christian office and pastoral ministry during the time the New Testament was written'.<sup>25</sup> This need not be interpreted as abrogating women's teaching authority as such, but rather ensures that men do not suffer public shame or dishonour as a consequence of the way in which women teach. In this particular context, 1 Timothy puts the brake somewhat on women's capacity to teach (or at least to teach in a certain manner); it is not a command against women's teaching, still less for all time. Note that, even in exercising authority in the early church, women were still expected to conform to traditional female virtues of modesty and decorum, as in the case of Thekla in the second century.<sup>26</sup> However, the reason for this also involves a strategy that will not import agonistic honour/shame patterns of behaviour into the community.<sup>27</sup> This, then, would be symptomatic of a broader strategy adopted by early Christians which also includes the rejection of reciprocity<sup>28</sup> and subversion of societal norms (Philemon).<sup>29</sup>

1 Timothy's context, often identified as Ephesus, may reveal the issues which are being addressed.<sup>30</sup> Michael Immendörfer considers that the cult of Artemis was a formative element in the Ephesian Christian context.<sup>31</sup> Ephesus was famous for its Artemision, the temple to the goddess Artemis – one of the seven wonders of the ancient world – who had protective oversight of women, including in pregnancy and childbirth. Women served as priestesses within the cult of Artemis, which was highly prized by the Ephesian populace. Acts tells of Paul's ministry in Ephesus and its threat to the cult: of a silversmith named Demetrius, who made statuettes of the goddess and accused Paul publicly of undermining his business and the honour of the deity within Ephesus. The public response to Demetrius in the widespread cry of 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' indicates for Luke the centrality of the cult within the city (Acts 19:23–41).<sup>32</sup> If women held particular offices within the cult, it is not inconceivable that those who became Christians felt that they too might possess a similar ascendancy within the Christian community. Here, a popular misunderstanding must be put aside. The Artemis cult was not, as has often been asserted, one which revolved around cult prostitution, and which would therefore most likely have involved those of low or slave status. Analysis of the inscriptions about the priestesses paints a different picture: of

<sup>25</sup>Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, p. 294, n. 41.

<sup>26</sup>S. E. Hulen, *A Modest Apostle: Thekla and the History of Women in the Early Church*. (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 73–81.

<sup>27</sup>Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), p. 16.

<sup>28</sup>Stephan Joubert, 'Homo Reciprocus No More: The "Missional" Nature of Faith in James', in Jacobus Kok, Tobias Nicklas, Dieter T. Roth and Christopher M. Hays (eds), *Sensitivity towards Outsiders: Exploring the Dynamic Relationship between Mission and Ethics in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), pp. 382–400.

<sup>29</sup>Bernardo Cho, 'Subverting Slavery: Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul's Gospel of Reconciliation', *Evangelical Quarterly* 86/2 (2014), pp. 99–115.

<sup>30</sup>Jack Barentsen, *Emerging Leadership in the Pauline Mission: A Social Identity Perspective on Local Leadership Development in Corinth and Ephesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), p. 201; Jeon, *1 Timothy*, p. 19; Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 206.

<sup>31</sup>Michael Immendörfer, *Ephesians and Artemis: The Cult of the Great Goddess as the Epistle's Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

<sup>32</sup>Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), p. 140.



women from elite Ephesian families, and sometimes with significant financial resources, serving within a priesthood.<sup>33</sup> The status which they enjoyed was earned through their organisation of the cult mysteries.<sup>34</sup> Their role in managing these rituals indicates the exercise of power and authority in civil life, and is evidence that women's influence in the Roman world was not restricted solely to the domestic sphere.<sup>35</sup> It is easy to see how such a model of religious participation might appear aspirational, socially desirable and worthy of imitation. Since for Christians conforming to the religious norms of the wider society is rejected, within that specific context women are instructed, not to cease their teaching, but to teach in a way that did not assert the superior authority of one gender over the other.

If this reading is correct, it now becomes possible to see how it would cohere with Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:28–9, confirming the parity of women and men within the Christian assembly in a context where ethnic, class and gender divisions are overcome. These divisions become radically relativised in theological terms, since Christian identity is now grounded in faith in Jesus and in baptism into his death and resurrection. The new identity is, in other words, christological: a drawing of all the baptised into the new age and the identity of Christ himself, effected by the Spirit through the cross. In that sense, the verses from 1 Timothy could more profitably and consistently be translated: 'Let a woman learn in a quiet and submissive fashion. But I do not permit her to teach with the intent to dominate a man. She must be gentle in her demeanour.'<sup>36</sup> It is worth bearing in mind that Ephesus was the place of Prisca and Aquila's ministry and she is undoubtedly depicted as a teacher, as we have already noted. She is greeted, along with her husband, at the end of the following epistle (2 Timothy 4:19). It is hard to imagine Prisca being forbidden to teach in the Ephesian Christian assembly!

This difficult section finishes with some remarks about Adam and Eve which include the puzzling words that women are saved 'through childbearing' (1 Tim 2:15, NRSV). This is obviously problematic if taken literally: what of those women who have never given birth? Paul himself personally commends the celibate life in preference to the married state, for women as much as men (1 Cor 7:25–7), which proved the ground for the forms of celibate religious life which developed in the following centuries. It seems particularly harsh if one thinks of the generations of women religious and women missionaries who remained single and childless for the sake of their work for the kingdom. And what of all those women who have died giving birth, when the child also has died? Is their situation as hopeless as a literal reading would suggest? This is a verse which can be quoted literally and glibly, but sometimes Christian readers need to leave behind simplistic claims which effectively make their loving God into a capricious monster. This is one such case.

Oden finds a more satisfying alternative through a typological reading: Eve is, in Paul's view, the completion of Adam, yet the first to sin. Some commentators, old and new, have resisted interpretations which make Eve subordinate to Adam: neither 'coming second' (what would the implications be for Jesus following the Baptist?

<sup>33</sup>S. M. Baugh, 'Cult Prostitution in Ephesus: A Reappraisal', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42/4 (1999), pp. 456–7.

<sup>34</sup>R. Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), p. 66.

<sup>35</sup>G. M. Rogers, *The Mysteries of Artemis of Ephesus: Cult, Polis, and Change in the Graeco-Roman World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 425, n. 66.

<sup>36</sup>Linda L. Belleville, 'Exegetical Fallacies in Interpreting 1 Timothy 2:11–15', *Priscilla Papers* 17 (2003), pp. 2, 8–9.



asked Calvin),<sup>37</sup> nor being like a crown on the head.<sup>38</sup> However, both Adam and Eve are complicit in humanity's fall from grace into sin. Childbearing becomes a hallmark of that state for women, as the toil of the land does for men (Gen 3:16–19). However, when 1 Timothy talks of being saved through childbirth, it does not stop with the Genesis story, but moves into the story of Jesus. Just as Jesus is the 'second Adam', and salvation can be described in those terms (Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:45–9), so 'the Childbearing' (the Greek *tēs teknogonias* includes the definite article) arguably refers to the birth of the Saviour.<sup>39</sup> It may be rare, but, like 'the Cross', it is an example of a metonymy which stands not just for that particular event but for the whole of Christ's saving work. 1 Timothy includes the incarnation in the outline of the faith: '[Christ] was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up into glory' (1 Tim. 3:16). It is faith in this saving work of Jesus, which one receives in a spirit of tranquillity and submission (to God, not man) which is critical. To place the onus of salvation on childbearing rather than 'the Childbearing' is to demand a works-righteousness which flies in the face of Paul's usual message, present throughout the Pauline corpus, rather than salvation by gift or grace. It further removes the charge of misogyny in viewing the 'pains of giving birth ... as erasing the guilt of Eve'.<sup>40</sup> With a simplicity that will delight those who wield Occam's razor, it renders redundant more convoluted attempts to develop a theology of childbearing acceptable to modern concerns.<sup>41</sup> Purely and simply, if 'the Childbearing' refers to the incarnation, there is no need for any justification of childbirth within the text.

### 1 Timothy 3:1–13: *gynaikas* and *andres*

The dispute in this text revolves around the interpretation of two Greek words. In the first case, the letter moves from discussion on the qualifications for the diaconate to the *gynaikas* at 3:11. In Greek, the word *gynē* can mean 'woman' or 'wife', depending on the context. The ESV translates it here as 'wives', meaning the wives of deacons whose various qualities for office include having a pious and sober wife, along with good household management. If the word means 'women', however (as in the NRSV and NIV), it probably refers to female deacons in the church. The CEB makes this explicit: 'women who are servants in the church' ('servant' being its translation of the Greek *diakonos*). Romans 16:1 speaks of Phoebe as a deacon and we know of women deacons more generally in the early church. It is more likely that 1 Timothy has in mind female deacons whose gifts and graces are to be similar to the male deacons.

<sup>37</sup>Oden, *First and Second*, p. 99.

<sup>38</sup>Gary W. Demarest, *1 & 2 Thessalonians/1 & 2 Timothy/Titus*, vols. 31–2 of *The Preachers Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1984), p. 182.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 181–3; Oden, *First and Second*, pp. 99–102. This typological interpretation also had its supporters in pre-critical interpreters like Theophylact (c.1055–1107), Amelia Lanyerr (1569–1645) and Dorothy Leigh (d. 1616). For Theophylact, see Philip Barton Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), p. 131; for Lanyerr and Leigh, see Victoria Brownlee, 'Literal and Spiritual Births: Mary as Mother in Seventeenth-Century Women's Writing', *Renaissance Quarterly* 68/4 (2015), pp. 1297–1326.

<sup>40</sup>Schotroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, p. 239, n. 34.

<sup>41</sup>Heather Celoria, 'Does 1 Timothy 2 Prohibit Women from Teaching, Leading, and Speaking in the Church?', *Priscilla Papers* 27/3 (2013), pp. 21–2; Emilia Nihinlola, 'Saved through Childbearing: An African Feminist Interpretation', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 40/4 (2016), pp. 314–26.

In the second case, the problem revolves around the translation of the phrase (literally) ‘one-woman man’, sometimes translated ‘husband of one wife’ (ESV) or ‘married only once’ (NRSV), which demands that the deacon be upright in relation to marital status. Given that polygamy was illegal in the Roman-Hellenistic world, it is likely that this reference is primarily to marital fidelity rather than literal monogamy: ‘faithful to their spouse’ (CEB) or simply ‘monogamous’ in the sense of sexually exclusive. Once again, this need not be read as male-only deacons but rather those who remain faithful to the one spouse.

It could be objected that the literal meaning of ‘man’ in the phrase refers not to humanity in general but to a male person, in line with the normal distinction made between the Greek *anthrōpos* (‘human being’) and *anēr* (‘male person’). This division, however, is only an approximation. There are contexts in which *anthrōpos* can mean ‘male person’ and there are contexts in which the plural form *andres*, which we could normally translate ‘men’, can include women as well. In Acts 17:34, for example, Luke refers to Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris, a woman, as *andres*: both becoming disciples of Paul after his sermon on the Areopagus in Athens.

Another objection that could be made is that women had no power in the ancient world and therefore would never be in such a position that they are asked to rein back their authority. But that is a misunderstanding of the complexity and diversity of the ancient world. It was undoubtedly a patriarchal context across the Mediterranean domain, and women were never accorded citizenship nor educated in most cases beyond a sketchy home-schooling,<sup>42</sup> but their access to power and influence varied considerably from one place to another. Roman elite women, for example, could wield significant authority, even to the extent of inheriting property, in contrast to Greek women and, to a lesser extent, Jewish women.<sup>43</sup> Some women could conduct business and even make their mark in civic society;<sup>44</sup> a small but influential minority were well enough educated to participate in some philosophical circles.<sup>45</sup> Female deities might also accord women devotees a significant degree of power and even autonomy, such as in the worship of Bona Dea in Rome,<sup>46</sup> the cult of Artemis in Ephesus or devotion to the Egyptian goddess Isis.<sup>47</sup> This evidence illustrates the plausibility of 1 Timothy advocating a dampening of spiritual power by certain women teachers in the Ephesian Christian community, particularly if it risks importing the honour/shame modality and promoting disorder within the community. The Pauline tradition recognises a need for order within the community and the conduct of its worship: this, it may be suggested, is an overarching theme in 1 Corinthians 10–14, which explores its significance in relation to dress, ministries, eucharistic practice and public speaking. The reading of 1 Timothy suggested here thus sits four-square with undisputed Pauline concerns and tradition.

<sup>42</sup>Westfall, *Paul and Gender*, pp. 238–40.

<sup>43</sup>Hysten, *A Modest Apostle*, pp. 7–42.

<sup>44</sup>Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), pp. 225–56.

<sup>45</sup>Barnes, *Reading*, pp. 37–64.

<sup>46</sup>Hendrik H. J. Brouwer, *Bona Dea: The Sources and Description of the Cult* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), pp. 37–8, 346, 377.

<sup>47</sup>Elizabeth A. McCabe, *An Examination of the Isis Cult with Preliminary Exploration into New Testament Studies* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008), p. 100.

### 1 Timothy 4:7: ideology and etymology

Schottroff's claim that 'old wives' tales' (1 Tim 4:7, NRSV) indicates misogyny or an accusation of complicity in witchcraft needs to be approached with caution.<sup>48</sup> To take the phrase thus risks both an overly literal, rather than an idiomatic, approach to translation and succumbing to the etymological fallacy, long debunked by James Barr, in which the primal meaning is loaded into every usage.<sup>49</sup> To see the problem here, consider that, as twenty-first century readers, we may be 'fascinated' by what we discover – but this rarely entails either supernatural enchantment or making of the evil eye as a strict etymology would demand.

Dennis R. MacDonald has also adopted an etymological, if not downright literalist, reading: the verse refers to harmful tales about Paul circulated by women. He does, however, note that the term is taken by many as synonymous with nonsense.<sup>50</sup> Given that the term appears frequently in philosophical literature from Plato onwards as a means of dismissing contrary or outmoded views, this would appear a more likely lexical frame of reference than issues of gender.<sup>51</sup> Eratosthenes, for example, dismissed details recorded by Homer using such terms.<sup>52</sup> Even if the modern reader insists on the etymology remaining in place, an important qualification follows. 1 Timothy 5:1 advises that older women all be treated like mothers: the one type of older women guaranteed respect, even, on occasion, for their storytelling.<sup>53</sup> Any pejorative linguistic element is quickly obviated by paraenetic instruction.

### 1 Timothy 5:4–16: freedom for widows?

1 Timothy 5:4–16 draws attention to how widows are to be treated. As in the Thessalonian correspondence, there is a concern that the church's charitable work not be used by some to evade their responsibilities (cf. 1 Tim 5:4, 16 and 2 Thess 3:6–12); this is aimed at members of the congregation, presumably the blood-relatives of widows, who are failing in their duties (1 Tim 5:8, 16). While Paul's teaching here aligns with the teaching of Jesus (Mark 7:11–12), there is no evidence to suggest that specific Judaic traditions were being resisted here. Readers should not assume that there must be links between passages which treat related material: sometimes all that they have in common is shared issues in their different environments.<sup>54</sup> The fate of widows across classical society was complex and difficult. Statistics from Roman Egypt suggest a variety of options for widows. A significant number remained with their children and functioned as heads of household. Also common was for widows to live with either parents or siblings, from where they might remarry. However, the statistics are problematic. Widows returning to the family home tend to be classified as 'sisters' or (after remarrying) as 'wives': effectively, a number of widows become

<sup>48</sup>Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, pp. 73, 239, n. 35.

<sup>49</sup>Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) pp. 112–13; Stephen Shead, *Radical Frame Semantics and Biblical Hebrew: Exploring Lexical Semantics* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 30–1.

<sup>50</sup>Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle: The Battle for Paul in Story and Canon* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1983), p. 14.

<sup>51</sup>Jan N. Bremmer, 'No Country for Old Women', in Jan N. Bremmer, *The World of Greek Religion and Mythology: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), pp. 241, 249.

<sup>52</sup>Suzanne Saïd, *Homer and the Odyssey* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), p. 160.

<sup>53</sup>Euripides, *Wise Melanippe*, F 484, cited in Bremmer, 'No Country', pp. 249–50.

<sup>54</sup>Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, pp. 113–14.

invisible. It was fairly unusual for them to remain in the household of their in-laws. Greek and Roman practice did not embrace levirate unions: an unmarried woman risked abuse of getting mired in sexual politics within the family.<sup>55</sup>

In a nutshell, the letter has to address a number of potential outcomes for widows, especially if the congregation includes members shaped by Greek, Jewish and Roman cultures. Within this passage, attention shifts from what Timothy is to do, to how widows should behave. In so doing, agency is placed in their hands, rather than within societal conventions. It introduces the potential for widows to be an office within the church, apparently without parallels in other ancient literature that describes the duties of different household members.<sup>56</sup> They are to avoid pleasure (1 Tim 5:6), presumably what is desirable by earthly standards, and focus on God. This may indicate the presence of a libertarian element (Rom 6:1–4; 1 Cor 6:12) as well as ascetism amongst Timothy's charges, or simply a common trope about the behaviour of widows which persists across many cultures.

1 Timothy 5:9–16 introduces a strategy to avoid assistance to widows becoming problematic within the community. Distinctions are to be made on the grounds of age and virtue. 1 Timothy 5:11 warns that promiscuity or wantonness indicates a departure from faith in Christ, confirmed by the mention of Satan in 1 Timothy 5:15.<sup>57</sup> The comment that younger widows might be tempted to remarry distances him from the position of the ascetic group who would, most likely, deny marriage completely (1 Tim 4:3). Whilst the advice may appear critical of younger widows, and perhaps, even harsh in suggesting that they should remarry, this need not be so: he is being realistic in allowing alternatives (cf. 1 Cor 7:8–9). In some circumstances, this may be liberating, as it gives young widows freedom of choice. The realism seems much kinder, and in his view, also yields practical benefits: by allowing a greater degree of personal fulfilment it reduces the opportunities for harmful and pernicious behaviour which might be fuelled by frustration (1 Tim 5:13). Note how the outcomes reflect Roman, rather than Jewish or Hellenistic, custom: the young widows who remarry are to exercise authority in the running of their households (1 Tim 5:14).<sup>58</sup> His words may have greater unforeseen consequences. He effectively gives women a greater choice in their destiny than some cultural norms; for example, that marriage is a 'once-in-a-lifetime' event, demanding that widows should remain unmarried out of respect.<sup>59</sup> As a last point, it may even be possible (though this imports a detail from 2 Tim 1:5) that the text here tacitly recognises the pivotal family and household role which such widows may have in shaping subsequent Christian generations: Lois and Eunice, the forebears of Timothy, are recognised as having a crucial role in his formation as a Christian.

If such a reading reflects an understanding of Paul which persists within the tradition that bears his name, Robin Scroggs, in talking of Paul's attitude to women,

<sup>55</sup>Sabine R. Huebner, *The Family in Roman Egypt: A Comparative Approach to Intergenerational Solidarity and Conflict* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), pp. 97–104.

<sup>56</sup>Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1972), pp. 73–4.

<sup>57</sup>Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 132–3.

<sup>58</sup>Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society in Pompeii and Herculaneum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>59</sup>Dvora E. Weisberg, *Levirate Marriage and the Family in Ancient Judaism* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2009), p. 10.

provides, by extension, a useful evaluation of that tradition's continued and complex negotiation of its contemporary cultural diversity:

The remarkable contrast between Paul's mature Christian views towards women and his probable early ideas says something important about the continual tension in which he must have lived and worked, as well as about the transforming power on his own life of the gospel he preached. ... The crossfire between pagan mores and Judaism has become for the Christian Paul a crossfire between his Hellenistic Judaism and his basic Christian theological stance. Struggles such as these are apparent throughout his correspondence, and it is a credit both to his flexibility and his integrity that the gospel won as often as it did.<sup>60</sup>

## 2 Timothy 3:6–9: 'silly' women and sillier translators

This passage may seem harsh, presenting women as 'silly' (NRSV). It is another pericope which contributes to the depiction of Paul as a misogynist which persists in some contemporary circles. But the problem here is more with the translation than the original writer. The Greek *gunaikaria* (diminutive, 'little women') better suggests 'weak', 'vulnerable' or 'open to victimisation', with the qualification that a religious sensibility and awareness of guilt may make one even more liable.<sup>61</sup> Such a diminutive famously features in Mark 7:27–8//Matthew 15:26–7 (Greek *kynarion*, little dog). This may make that hard saying of Jesus softer in tone, though that remains debatable.<sup>62</sup> It is still problematic for some, but not as dismissive as 'silly'. Then there is the matter of whether this one phrase has distracted from the central issue.

Consider the following: the emphasis of this section is on predatory behaviour rather than a condemnation of women's weakness. The tragic history of abuse of the vulnerable by church workers which has been so widely documented and recognised in recent years should make for a reading which recognises the dangers of predators and abusers, rather than shames victims. Indeed, such an interpretation fits naturally with the list of harmful behaviours in the preceding verses and is confirmed by the focus of the verses which follow: Jannes and Jambres, the court magicians of Pharaoh who stood against Moses. These verses cry out against perpetrators, not their victims. From this perspective, their words are additionally a reminder that those who deploy missional workers should do all in their power to ensure that they are not unleashing prospective predators on the vulnerable, and that those who offer for service should be ready to undergo rigorous checks, without taking these as a personal slight.

## Conclusions

This study raises interpretative questions about the relationship between the biblical text and the context, both then and now. Context is something of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it can open up the biblical text for us, as we understand the ancient context from the perspective of the contemporary. Thus, we can read the ancient text anew, setting it in its likely context. Then, from our own vantage-point, we may see

<sup>60</sup>Robin Scroggs, *The Text and the Times: New Testament Essays for Today* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), p. 79.

<sup>61</sup>Oden, *First and Second*, pp. 77–8.

<sup>62</sup>Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 176. Contra, Stephen G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), p. 8.

different perspectives within the text, both acknowledging yet also challenging past interpretations. For example, modern understandings of the way in which gender restrictions operate to alienate women's faith and ministry play a significant role in the way we reinterpret the Pauline corpus. Yet such gendered readings are far from being monolithic. The negative way in which one writer might regard the biblical text – as displaying a deep level of chauvinism that needs to be exposed – is very different from a more sympathetic reading that is prepared to rethink the conclusions of past generations and find within it something more congenial and transforming.

Why do these two approaches differ? Perhaps there is no simple answer to the question. There is certainly a preconception in the mind of some readers – and there are always preconceptions<sup>63</sup> – that the Bible, along with the Christian tradition, is at its heart friendly towards women, despite centuries of patriarchal overlay. This conviction applies not only to Paul but also to his heirs within the New Testament. New readings can thereby be drawn from the shadows onto centre stage. The interpretation of the Pastoral Epistles in this article belongs within this framework. We might label this as a 'hermeneutics of trust'.<sup>64</sup> Other readers, by contrast, approach the text with a sense of doubt: a suspicion that the androcentric context of the ancient world has infiltrated the text without challenge and distorted the original, inclusive message of Jesus in his proclamation of the liberating reign of God. In this second view, Paul and even more his successors are regarded as the exponents of a reactionary backlash that seeks to dampen or even eliminate the radical edge of the message, particularly around issues of gender. We might label these as typical of a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', always aware of Robin Scroggs' wry comment that such a hermeneutic may risk becoming a 'hermeneutic of paranoia'.<sup>65</sup>

The latter approach seems to regard itself as the more radical option in feminist discourse while the former is dismissed as conservative. Yet these value judgements create an unhelpful bifurcation. What is truly radical theologically is that which conveys the heart of the gospel, a gospel that is by definition inclusive and at enmity with all forms of alterity that reduce others to insignificance by reason of gender, race, age, culture and other forms of social alienation.

The readings provided in the article suggest that 1 and 2 Timothy have not been well-treated by some later interpreters. On occasion, ideological concerns have dominated the reading of the texts which have erroneously been used as proof-texts to support those same ideologies, effectively producing circular arguments which have gained a fresh unwarranted authority from their purported basis in canonical scripture. The subtleties of the original arguments have been lost from sight, notably in the typological reading of 'the Childbirth' and the teaching role of women. Blanket bans and the use of these verses as universal mandates about teaching have ridden roughshod over those carefully nuanced and contextual arguments which saw Paul and his immediate successors negotiating a careful road between the societal norms of his time and the new ethos of emerging Christianity. The variety of opportunities afforded to widows has been

<sup>63</sup>Karl Barth, 'Rudolf Bultmann: An Attempt to Understand Him', in H. W. Bartsch and R. H. Fuller (eds.), *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1972), pp. 83–102; Rudolf Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', in H. W. Bartsch and R. H. Fuller (eds.), *Kerygma and Myth* (London: SPCK, 1972), pp. 145–53.

<sup>64</sup>For a detailed overview, see Fergus J. King, 'More than a Vapid Sound: The Case for a Hermeneutic of Resonance', *Journal for Theology in Southern Africa* 148 (2014), pp. 83–98.

<sup>65</sup>Scroggs, *Text and Times*, p. 218.

obscured. Above all, the egalitarian practice envisioned in these texts appears to embody the ethos of what would become the 'third way' between Judaism and Graeco-Romanitas, most clearly seen in the undisputed Pauline writings (e.g. Gal 3:28) which demand nothing less than an obliteration of the conventions of antiquity, notably the overarching preoccupation with honour and shame, and their modern equivalents, starting with 'the societal-leveling quality of baptism'.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Scroggs, *Text and Times*, p. 81.