

**SAVING WEALTHY EPHESIAN WOMEN
FROM A SELF-CENTERED WAY OF LIFE
(1 TIM 2:15): SALVATION
BY CHILDBEARING IN THE CONTEXT
OF ANCIENT ARGUMENTS AGAINST
SEXUAL INTERCOURSE, PREGNANCY,
AND CHILD-REARING**

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Abstract

Many Bible readers regard the statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 (“She will be saved through childbearing ...”) as very unfair. Why did Paul (or one of his disciples) lose sight of gender equality? And is this passage not irreconcilable with passages such as Galatians 3:28, where Paul advocated the soteriological equality of the sexes, and with 1 Corinthians 7:8, where Paul encouraged unmarried women and widows to remain single? 1 Timothy 2:15 confronts us with two exegetical challenges. First, its telegraphic style was probably quite comprehensible for Paul’s protégé Timothy; but for us who are much less familiar with Paul’s thoughts, it is much more difficult to decipher. Secondly, while for Paul, Timothy and the women concerned the concrete situation in the church of Ephesus was crystal clear, for us who are not involved and look at it from a distance of 2000 years it is anything but easy to figure out what exactly Paul was talking about. But read against its literary and historical context, 1 Timothy 2:15 is not a misogynistic text but rather a statement against luxury-oriented selfishness which is in conflict with the law of love.

Introduction

As far as I am concerned, one of the most troubling texts in the New Testament is 1 Timothy 2:15: “She (i.e., the woman) will be saved through childbearing...” In his Dutch commentary on the Pastorals, Rob van Houwelingen has joined the never-ending discussion of this

sentence.¹ In my contribution to this volume, which honours Rob on the occasion of his retirement, I would like to join this discussion.

Many Bible Readers are Perplexed

Many Bible readers regard Paul's² statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 as very unfair in several respects. First, what about women who live as singles, voluntarily or involuntarily? What about married women who cannot have children for medical reasons? Further, why did Paul admonish just women to have children and not also men? Why did he lose sight of gender equality? And finally, is this passage not irreconcilable with passages such as Galatians 3:28, where Paul advocated the soteriological equality of the sexes, and with 1 Corinthians 7:8, where Paul encouraged unmarried women and widows to remain single?³ I suspect that because of these issues, the majority of Christians and Christian churches find it difficult to do anything constructive with this troubling passage of Scripture and simply ignore it.

Some Biblical Scholars Pronounce Harsh Verdicts

One of the harshest scholarly verdicts on 1 Timothy 2:15 was pronounced by Annette Merz. She believes that according to this passage "women are reduced to the status of uteri."⁴ For women, "the consummation of a marriage becomes in and of itself a redemptive act."⁵ Therefore, "the husband becomes the redeemer of his wife. Christ attains his eschatological goal for women only by means of the husband's expropriation of his

¹ P.H.R. van Houwelingen, *Timotheüs en Titus: Pastorale instructiebrieven*, 4th ed., Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament, derde serie (Kampen: Kok, 2011), 79–84.

² I share the view of Luke Timothy Johnson (*The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, AB 35A [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002]) and van Houwelingen (*Timotheüs en Titus*) that 1 Timothy was written by Paul; cf. also the important linguistic arguments presented by Jermo van Nes, *Pauline Language and the Pastoral Epistles: A Study of Linguistic Variation in the Corpus Paulinum*, Linguistic Biblical Studies 16 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018).

³ Cf. John Chrysostom, *In epistulam ad Titum homiliae* 9 (on 1 Tim 2:11–15): "What will be the case with virgins, with the barren, with widows who have lost their husbands, before they had children? Will they perish? Is there no hope for them?" (*NPNF*¹ 13:436). As Chrysostom's questions demonstrate, Christians have been wrestling with this text long before our particularly gender sensitive age.

⁴ Anette Merz, *Die fiktive Selbstausslegung des Paulus: Intertextuelle Studien zur Intention und Rezeption der Pastoralbriefe*, NTOA / SUNT 52 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 370.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 366.

wife's body."⁶ Consequently, 1 Timothy 2:15 "constitutes nothing less than the annulment of the soteriological equality of the sexes" by preaching "a unique way of salvation for women that disqualifies them as a matter of principle from an ascetic way of life."⁷ It is obvious that Merz emphatically disapproves of such an unfair view of women. And her sense of revulsion against these views is quite comprehensible.

The Exegetical Options are Particularly Numerous

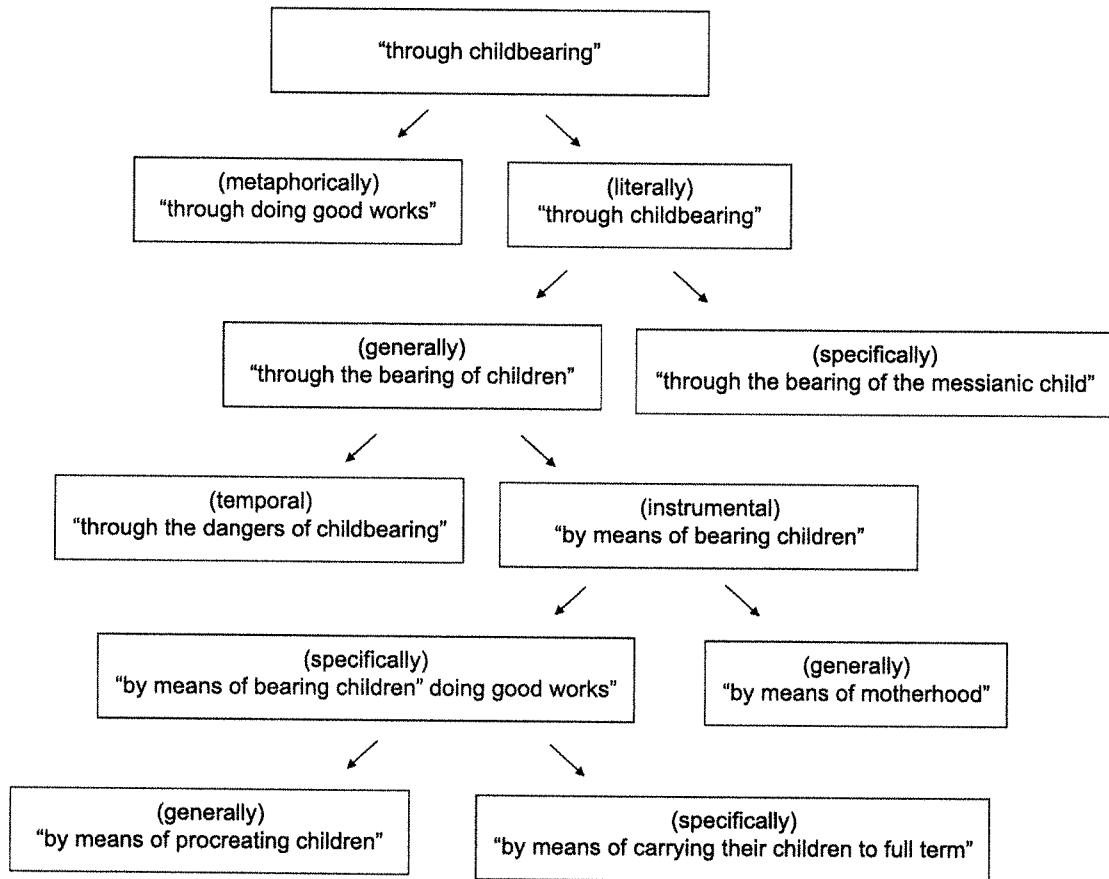
But the exegesis offered by Merz is by no means the only plausible explanation. Because there have been so many different interpretations, a review of research on 1 Timothy 2:15 is more complex than for many other texts. This short sentence contains three phrases where the interpreters part ways. They differ regarding the meaning of "she will be saved" (v. 15b) and of "provided they continue" (v. 15c). But the first and most important exegetical road fork is the word "childbearing" (v. 15a). A simple chart can help us avoid getting lost on our exegetical journey (see page 260).

The statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 confronts us with two exegetical challenges. First, its telegraphic style was probably quite comprehensible for Paul's protégé Timothy; but for us who are much less familiar with Paul's thoughts it is much more difficult to decipher. I will look at this passage from an exegetical perspective in the third section of this chapter.

Secondly, while for Paul, Timothy and the women concerned in 1 Timothy 2:15 the concrete situation in the church of Ephesus was crystal clear, for us who are not involved and look at it from a distance of 2000 years, it is anything but easy to figure out what exactly Paul was talking about. I will turn to this historical investigation in the next section.

⁶ Ibid., 363.

⁷ Ibid., 375. Cf. also Annette Merz, "'New' Woman? Bruce W. Winters These und ihre kritische Rezeption in der exegetischen Diskussion kritisch beleuchtet," in *Frauen im antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum*, ed. J. Frey and N. Rupschus, WUNT 2/489 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 209–34, where she observes that some of her Dutch colleagues, among them P.H.R. van Houwelingen and Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, find Winter's much less offensive interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9–15 convincing (211, 217–18) while she believes that he uses ancient source texts in a very uncritical way and is not interested in scholarly discussions and the exchange of exegetical and historical arguments (231–32); see Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).



Ancient Background: Relevant Historical Contexts

In all ancient cultures involuntary childlessness was lamented.⁸ In the first creation narrative of the Bible, procreation is declared to be one of the main purposes of marriage (Gen 1:28). Accordingly, in Old Testament times childlessness was interpreted as a calamity (Gen 15:2, 16:1–2, 25:20–21; 1 Sam 1:10–11) and as a punishment (Lev 20:20–21). This was also the overwhelming majority opinion in early Jewish times.

In the Greco-Roman culture of Antiquity, the bearing and rearing of children was also considered an essential purpose of marriage. Childless women turned to the gods or doctors for deliverance from their (or their husbands') infertility.

Nevertheless, there were also ancient voices in favour of voluntary childlessness. Voluntary renunciation of children was justified with different arguments. A first argument was of a medical nature.

⁸ Cf. the overview in Peter Thrans and Wolfram Drews, "Kinderlosigkeit," *RAC* 20:947–64.

Thirdly and probably most notably, the word σωφροσύνη (“soundness of mind”⁹⁸) could be applied to men, to women, to boys, and to girls. In respect to boys “soundness of mind” meant “decency,” in respect to men “control of desire,” in respect to girls “chastity,” and in respect to women “chastity” or “marital fidelity.”⁹⁹ This female shade of meaning was particularly prominent in the Pythagorean letters:

A woman’s greatest virtue is chastity (σωφροσύνα). Because of this quality she is able to honour and to cherish her own particular husband... Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities because of the strength of men’s bodies and the power of their minds. Chastity (σωφροσύναν) is more appropriately female ... the most important quality for chastity (τὰς σωφροσύνας) is to be pure in respect to her marriage bed, and for her not to have affairs with men from other households...¹⁰⁰

In Pythagorean texts, the concept of female “chastity” is often used in connection with her clothing and adornment, just as in 1 Timothy 2:9–15.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

As a result, I present an interpretive paraphrase of 1 Timothy 2:15 that is based on the exegetical and historical decisions justified above:

(The luxury-minded) women (in the church of Ephesus)
will be saved (from their spiritually dangerous self-centered lifestyle)
by bearing children (and thereby accepting the maternal role)
and by holding fast to (the basic Christian virtues of) faith, love, and
holiness
and (particularly) chastity.

If my exegetical and historical analysis is broadly correct, the following conclusion can be drawn: 1 Timothy 2:15 opposed neither childlessness caused by celibacy nor childlessness caused by infertility. Rather, this initially disturbing sentence explicitly condemned the childlessness of

⁹⁸ LSJ s.v.

⁹⁹ Adriaan Rademaker, *Sophronyne and the Rhetoric of Self-Restraint: Polysemy & Persuasive Use of an Ancient Greek Value Term*, *Mnemosyne Supplements* 259 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 276–79.

¹⁰⁰ Phintys, *De mulierum modestia* (trans. Lefkowitz and Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, 205–206).

¹⁰¹ Cf. Annette Bourland Huizenga, “*Sōphrosynē* for Women in Pythagorean Texts,” in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer, *WUNT* 263 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 379–99.

Christian wives who were practicing a luxurious and selfish way of life. Implicitly, it also condemned the childlessness of Christian husbands who did not want to have children for selfish reasons. Therefore, 1 Timothy 2:15 was not in conflict with 1 Corinthians 7:8 where Paul encouraged the unmarried and the widows “to remain unmarried,” not for shellfish reasons but in order to serve.

The First Letter to Timothy neither reduced women to their wombs nor defined for them a special way of salvation. Read against its literary and historical context, 1 Timothy 2:15 is not a misogynistic text but rather a statement against luxury-oriented selfishness which is in conflict with the law of love.

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