

VI  
AN EXEGESIS OF 1 TIMOTHY 2:11-15  
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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The basic content of 1 Tim 2 deals with prayer and worship. In vss. 1-2 Paul urges prayers for kings and all those in authority; in vs. 8 he exhorts men to pray without anger or disputing; in vss. 9-10 he counsels women to dress modestly with decency and propriety; in vss. 11-15 he forbids women to teach or exercise authority over men and learn in silence and submission.

The major problem in the exegesis of the passage (11-15) is found in vs. 15—*sōthēsetai dia tēs teknogonias*. The rest of the passage is straightforward enough.

The passage reads in this way in the RSV:

“Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

**Exegesis**

**Verse 11. “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness.”** Ordinarily one would expect no such instruction given the customs and practices of the times. The Jews probably had a different section for the women in the synagogues, either in one part of the synagogue divided by a low wall<sup>1</sup> or in the gallery section.<sup>2</sup> But apparently there was something in the Christian gospel that brought a sense of liberation to women. At least they began to act less passively than heretofore, and Paul had to lay down some rules for their behavior in public worship. If they pray or prophesy, they must wear a veil (1 Cor 11:2-16). Otherwise they must keep silent in church (1 Cor 14:34-35). Thus here also in 1 Tim Paul finds it necessary to give the instruction he gave to the Corinthian church.

**Verse 12. “I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.”** Paul did not forbid women to teach. He instructed the older women to teach the younger (Titus 2:3-4). Elsewhere in the NT we find Priscilla and Aquila teaching Apollos (Acts 18:26). Euodia and Syntyche “contended at [Paul’s] side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers” (Phil 4:3, NIV). Apparently also he is not forbidding praying or prophesying on the part of women.

Some suggest that what Paul is forbidding in this specific situation is the official teaching of a woman before the church, an authorized proclamation of the word with ecclesiastical authority.<sup>3</sup> E. F. Scott says that “the word teach must be taken in the technical sense of making a set public address.”<sup>4</sup> J. M. Ford carries this thought a step farther by interpreting *authenthein* as exercising “supreme authority” and *didaskein* in the sense of “formulating doctrine.” She feels that the prohibition is directed “not against teaching in general, but having the final decision

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<sup>1</sup>Philo, *Contemplative Life*, III.

<sup>2</sup>E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*. The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy, 1930 (London, 1934), pp. 47-48.

<sup>3</sup>George Gunter Blum, “Das Amt der Frau im Neuen Testament,” *Novum Testamentum* 7 (1964): 157.

<sup>4</sup>E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (London, 1936), p. 26.

about such teaching,” that is, “teaching in the capacity of a bishop.”<sup>5</sup> She has carried her point farther than the evidence warrants even though her point is that this passage does not forbid ordination or teaching on the part of women as long as they are not placed in the office of bishop.

N. J. Hommes, on the other hand, takes the opposite position in regard to teaching, which he affirms is not connected with an office. There was a large group of qualified teachers in each congregation who participated freely, and it was done with discussion and admonition. It cannot be equated with our preaching, where one person speaks and all the rest listen. What is in view in this passage, he feels, is a rather informal type of service with many participants, and that the women addressed here are *married* women who are being admonished not “to be bossy over one’s husband.” Paul is concerned with upholding the ideal of the Christian housewife.<sup>6</sup> From this Hommes concludes that this passage in no way forbids the ordination of women as ministers; it is not even dealing with this matter but with the matter of the conduct of a Christian wife who should not upstage her husband in the Christian service as carried on in Paul’s day. Some feel that the context, while addressed to married women, includes women in general and implies the proper relationship between men and women whether married or single. While it is also true that we cannot equate teaching in this context with preaching in our day, it is not difficult to see that this instruction would have applied equally had such practice been in force.

Exegetes usually see this passage as more than a simple instruction in the course of the normal situation of the church. The Epistle itself indicates that women were playing a relatively active but negative role in the affairs of the church. Paul refers to the danger of young widows becoming “gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not” (1 Tim 5:13, RSV). He says some of them have “already strayed after Satan” (5:15, RSV), and sees danger of wives becoming “slanderers” (3:11). And in 2 Tim he says that the heretics “capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (3:6-7, RSV). When this is connected with the fact that the heretics were teaching celibacy, there is some reason to feel that this and the following verse originated in a controversial situation. Kelly comments thus: “His repeated insistence on the point may be due to a suspicion on his part that the Ephesian errorists were exploiting the readiness of religiously-minded women to claim what he considered an unbecoming prominence for themselves.”<sup>7</sup>

**Verse 13. “For Adam was formed first, then Eve.”** The reasons for “the above prohibition are set forth. The first of these is that chronological precedence indicates superiority. This argument is similar to that found in 1 Cor 11:8-9: For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (NIV). Paul, however, softens this argument when he goes on to say, “In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” (1 Cor 11:11-12, NIV).

**Verse 14 “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”** The second reason women should not teach and have authority over men was that the first woman was deceived while Adam was not. While they both sinned and Paul considers Adam the representative of mankind (Rom 5:12), the point here is that Eve was led

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<sup>5</sup>J. M. Ford, “Biblical Material Relevant to Ordination of Women,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10 (1973): 683.

<sup>6</sup>N. J. Hommes, “Let Women Be Silent in Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 4 (1969): 5-22.

<sup>7</sup>J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York, 1963), p. 68.

astray through deceit while Adam deliberately sinned. One who teaches or is in a position of authority must not be so easily led astray. One who is thus vulnerable cannot be trusted to teach. The teacher, on the contrary, is one who leads, guides, and strengthens so that people will not go astray. But what has Eve to do with the women in Paul's day? The Hebrew concept of solidarity, in this case, of all women with Eve, is operative. Eve is an archetype and all women will breed true in the sense that they will partake of her characteristics and accept the relationship that existed between Adam and Eve. Barrett makes priority the difference not only in v 13 but also here. It is difficult to maintain that Paul is simply saying that Eve sinned before Adam.<sup>8</sup>

The key point here is not priority but weakness—the fact that she was deceived while Adam was not.

**Verse 15. “Yet the woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”** There are two grammatical problems with this verse and two problems concerning interpretation. The first grammatical problem arises from the fact that the verb (will be saved) is in the third person singular without an expressed nominal or pronominal subject. Does this refer to Eve or does it go back to the “woman” in vss. 10 and 11? The rest of the verse clearly shows that the reference goes beyond Eve to all women in general, especially since the second verb (to remain) is in the plural. And that is the second problem, since the first verb is singular and the second is plural and neither has an expressed subject. It seems clear that the second verb in the plural and the first verb in the singular have the plural and the singular of “women” respectively as their subjects. However, some have suggested that the subject of the second verb in the plural refers to the children who are born, or the husband and wife. The first is difficult since it would mean that the woman will be saved simply by bearing children without manifesting any Christian qualities herself, or that her salvation is dependent on her children's conduct. It could mean all women who merely fulfill this physical function will be saved. The second brings in an extraneous matter (the husband) who is not in view at this place. It is better to take it as referring to the first subject and explain the plural as a natural change since Paul has been dealing with women in the plural (vss. 9-10) or in general (vss. 11-12).

The second set of problems is interpretive. It concerns the meaning of the word *sōthēsetai* and the phrase *dia tes tēknogonias*. The NIV (“But women will be kept safe through childbirth”) follows Moffatt's view, which has reference to Gen 3:16. Even though women must bear children in pain, nevertheless they will come through safely “if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety” (NIV). This physical sense is hardly likely, especially since this consolation is given only if they maintain a good Christian life. What of those who do not? There is no discernible difference between Christian and non-Christian women in this respect. Others<sup>9</sup> interpret the clause as a reference to the bearing of the Messiah by Mary; that is, women will be saved in a spiritual sense through *the* Child-bearing. Concerning this interpretation, Kelly says, “It is true, of course, that the child-bearing of Mary has undone the mischief of Eve, but it seems incredible that Paul should have expected his vague ‘through the child-bearing’ to be understood, without further explanation, of Christ's nativity.”<sup>10</sup> E. F. Scott interprets this verse to mean that women will be saved even though they must suffer the penalty of Eve's sin. “He [Paul] has implied that in consequence of Eve's transgression they are permanently under a cloud; but he

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<sup>8</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles in the New English Bible*, The New Clarendon Bible (Oxford, 1963), p. 56.

<sup>9</sup>Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, 1924), p. 33, following Ellicott, von Soden, and Wohlenberg.

<sup>10</sup>Kelly, p. 69.

adds, ‘do not mistake me; though still reminded of their sin, they fully share in the offered salvation.’”<sup>11</sup> He arrives at this conclusion by translating the preposition *dia* as denoting a condition rather than its usual sense of “by means of.” Thus he translates, “She will be saved even though she must bear children.” This translation, to say the least, is unusual. S. Jebb has added another interpretation. “However, she may be *saved from falling into this error* of usurping authority and thus being deceived by Satan, by keeping to the proper function for which she was made. Bearing children will save her from being tempted to ‘lord it over’ the men” (emphasis his).<sup>12</sup> The problem with this interpretation is that the author has put too much freight into the word *sōthēsetai*. The meaning is expanded beyond what is justified. Another objection is that childbearing does not remove the temptation and is not the point of Paul’s remarks. Paul is simply directing them to what he considers their proper role. The temptation to “lord it over” men was not the weakness of women without children only, even though unmarried women may have figured prominently in the unrest there.

The interpretation that most commentators accept, and the most natural of them all, is to take *sōzō* in a spiritual sense and childbearing and rearing as denoting her divinely appointed function. But with this she must remain in faith, love, and sanctification with modesty. Even though a woman was deceived and led man to sin, nevertheless women may be saved if they fulfill their duty and maintain their Christian experience. To seek to usurp the function of men by teaching would jeopardize their salvation just as Eve did. The way of salvation is the way of submission in the fulfillment of the womanly functions. According to Jeremias the entire section (vss. 11-15) seeks only to prove that the asceticism which goes against the ordinance of creation, promoted by the errorists (1 Tim 4:3) is contrary to Scripture. According to Schlatter, this section deals with the preservation of marriage. At home are the God-desired duties of the woman—this is the Christian solution to the question of women which stands in sharpest contrast to the ascetic enthusiasm.<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that this heretical teaching has something to do with what Paul says here. But it is questionable whether this section seeks only to prove that this ascetic teaching was false as Jeremias affirms. Even if the heretical teachings loom in the near background, the problem of the subordinate role of women cannot be solved simply by saying that Paul was attacking the doctrine of the heretics. He still places women in a subordinate position and prohibits them from teaching.

### Implications

This passage is an excellent case for the application of hermeneutical principles. No one can apply the Bible literalistically in an absolutely thorough manner. This is true not only because there are elements in Scripture directed at specific cultural situations, but also because there are elements which stand in tension due to man’s situation in sin. In certain portions of Scripture polygamy is socially accepted but over against this stands the ideal monogamous marriage relationship in Eden and the teachings of Jesus. This is true with the practice of slavery militating against the idea of man’s value and integrity, which is a central teaching of Scripture. Our passage must be understood in the light of Paul’s statement of the equality of man and woman in Christ and of the theological implication of Gen 1 that man and woman together make the image

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>12</sup>S. Jebb, “A Suggested Interpretation of 1 Tim 2:15,” *Expository Times* 81 (1969-70): 221.

<sup>13</sup>J. Jeremias, “Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus,” *Neutestament Deutsch* 9 (Göttingen, 1954), p. 18.

of God and that one without the other is incomplete, not only with reference to marriage but to the totality of the spheres of life.

The temptation in hermeneutical questions of this sort is to take the shortcut by focusing and concentrating on statements dealing with specific cases rather than on principles derived from the total thrust of the Scriptures. While it is true that each specific case applies a general principle, that application may be valid only for that particular context and situation. Some may feel compelled on the basis of a specific case to enforce the practice of women wearing veils (not hats); but others may feel that the principle applied in this case is concerned with avoiding offence to society that would result from moving too quickly to change customs in situations where moral value is not in question.

The problem is complicated, however, since hardly anyone would argue for making a literalistic application of the Bible without reference to context. Rather, one must take the Bible as a whole as the basis for determining what is general principle applicable to all times and what is application of general principle to a specific time and place. There are two things that need to be kept in mind when biblical counsel given in one specific context is being applied to a contemporary situation. The first is to understand the biblical teachings aright and the second is to read discerningly the historical situation and context in which one lives. The application of biblical insights must sometimes be carried out at the risk of direct conflict with society. At other times the insights must await the leavening influence of Christian principles upon society and then the church must take the initiative in their application when the time becomes ripe. In the words of Raymond Stamm, "The love (*agape*) [1 Cor 13:13] which never fails suggested to him [Paul] certain restraints in deference to the prevailing social customs and moral conditions. Today this same love may require us to transcend these restrictions. Indeed, if we do not follow its prompting, we may falsify the very spirit of love which determined Paul's solutions for his day."<sup>14</sup>

Thus there are two possible approaches to the application of this passage. The first is to apply the passage literalistically without taking into full consideration the biblical principles regarding the role of women or by interpreting these principles as having spiritual but not social validity. Thus, the cultural situation is not a factor in this application. This first approach takes Paul's statement forbidding women to speak in church and commanding her subordination to men as a principle which is valid for all situations, with the implication that women may never be allowed to function as ministers. Supporters of this view would point to the manner in which Paul establishes his point. His support is the priority of Adam's creation over Eve's, and Eve's deception by the serpent. These two facts, they say, are not culture conditioned but remain true for all time.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Raymond Stamm, "The Status of Women Workers in the Church," *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1958): 158.

<sup>15</sup>The first reason Paul gives also in 1 Cor 11:8-9. But there he softens his argument when he goes on to say, "In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God" (1 Cor 11:11-12). In regard to the second reason, Paul elsewhere speaks of woman as being equal with man in Christ (Gal 3:28). Paul is aware of what it means to be in Christ and how Christ has brought new insights to men through his redemptive activity. After men sinned, woman became subordinate to man but with Christ's redemption man and woman stand on equal footing as in Gen 1 before sin. The coming of Christ has restored the original relationship between man and woman. However, the working out of this principle cannot be accomplished overnight. For example, the full impact and significance of the sacrifice with respect to the cessation of animal sacrifices took time. The meaning of baptism and its implication for the equality of all took time, as the disciples themselves hesitated to open the door of salvation to all on an equal footing. Christianity's implication for slavery took a bit longer. Thus it is not surprising that while Paul proclaims the equality of men and women in Christ, yet because of the specific situations with their potential for confusion and

J. M. Ford, mentioned earlier, is willing to apply this passage to our time, but says the passage deals with the office of one who formulates doctrine, that what Paul is forbidding to women is “teaching in the capacity of a bishop.”<sup>16</sup> Thus she does not interpret the passage as forbidding women to serve as teachers, which she feels Paul allows.

Though giving almost an opposite explanation, N. J. Hommes comes to the same general conclusion as Ford. According to him, teaching in the NT was an informal affair in which many took part and, in fact, in which every man had a right to function. It has nothing to do with our present-day practice of preaching. What the passage is concerned with by its prohibition of teaching is the quiet and unobtrusive behavior of married women. Since it does not deal with what we today call preaching, this passage is not relevant to the discussion concerning the ministry of women.<sup>17</sup>

The second approach to the interpretation of this passage is to consider the specific prohibition as directed to a specific cultural situation such as the statements regulating behavior between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:28; 11:3; cf. 15:29 with 1 Cor 8) and statements regarding slavery (Col 3:22-4:1; Eph 6:5-9). Paul does not call for the abolition of slavery, although he appeals for masters (apparently Christian masters) to be humane to their slaves and for Christian slaves to serve their masters well. The establishment of social equality between Jews and Gentiles was apparently hard fought. It was after many years, if ever, that the Christian Jews were willing to accept the Gentiles on equal terms. Apparently within the social structure of the Christian church there were slaves and masters of slaves. It took much longer to resolve the slavery issue than the Jew-Gentile issue, which probably was not fully resolved until after the destruction of Jerusalem. It was only a little more than a century ago that the slavery issue was resolved in America. And yet Paul in his day said, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). In his day Paul was able to see, at least to a large extent, the fulfillment not only of the spiritual but also of the social equality of the first pair (Jew-Gentile). The equality of the second pair (slave-free) was not achieved socially in Paul’s day although he felt they were equal before, and in, Christ. Paul did not seek to abolish slavery in the church, to say nothing about those outside the church. But he sought among Christians to remove the worst of conditions. Between Jew and Gentile he probably did little outside the church, but at least he sought to erase barriers within the church. Is the third of this triad (woman-man) to be looked at in the same way? That is to say, was Paul as concerned about the equality of man and woman as he was about Jew and Gentile; but while the time was ripe to deal with the latter, the social mind set and structures were not far enough advanced to deal with the former? By proclaiming the basic equality between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman, did not Paul lay the groundwork for the establishment of actual social equality among these?

In a similar context to that of 1 Tim, chap. 2, Paul treats the relationship between husbands and wives (Eph 5:22-33) and between masters and slaves, but he goes farther when he says, “Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God” (1 Cor 11:11-12). This statement is similar to that of Gal 3:28, “there is neither male nor female.” In other words, Paul had already laid down the basis for equality between man and woman as he had

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disorder, Paul not only urges caution but must use the strongest possible arguments against a practice that is unwise in the situation.

<sup>16</sup>Ford, p. 683.

<sup>17</sup>Hommes, pp. 5-22.

between Jew and Gentile, master and slave. But as long as a Christian lives in a culturally-conditioned world, he must take into cognizance the existing structures of society and the effect of his behavior and practice upon the church. There was something liberating about the gospel that spoke to Jew and Gentile, slave and master, man and woman. Even though the social structures may be opposed to the equality of these pairs, the Christian yeast when truly alive begins to work. The consciousness of men is awakened slowly but surely—now on this issue, now on that—and the moment becomes ripe for the church to seize the initiative in establishing and exercising equality on all spheres.

However, this means that only where such consciousness prevails can the church actually implement this principle. In a world field there will be many places even today where the time is not ripe. This is true even in the United States. In some cases the specific application in 1 Tim 2:11-15 is still valid. There may be only a few churches that are ready for the full acceptance of the equality of women. Even in those churches it may be wise to have a woman minister only in the context of a multiple ministry staff. The readiness of the church must determine the implementation of this policy. However, in any case, the principle of equality between men and women can be affirmed and practiced with regard to wages and the holding of offices that may not entail ordination. The church at this time must make a distinction between two questions: Can women be ordained? and should women serve as ministers? To the former it should give an unequivocal “yes.” To the latter the local situation must be the determining factor.

Other factors lend their weight to this conclusion. The situation in our part of the world today is far different from that of Paul’s day. Women play roles in society and in the church to the extent that is difficult to imagine in NT times. Women serve as prime ministers, cabinet members, leading officials of church bodies, presidents of colleges and universities, lawyers, physicians, judges, senators and representatives, ministers of churches, and so on. Within the Adventist Church itself, we have women who are university professors, members of institutional boards, officials in the General Conference departments, seminary professors, academy teachers, Sabbath School superintendents and teachers, speakers on Sabbath, etc. Are these developments not already against a literalistic application of 1 Tim 2:11-15? If Paul’s statements regarding specific situations are applicable today on a one-to-one basis, we have an impossible task of turning back developments in this area unless we can reason literalistically as Scaer does and say that this does not forbid university professors, etc., but only women making a public proclamation in church.<sup>18</sup> To this Hommes would respond that if we would be literal in that respect we must say that this type of teaching has no correlation to our preaching of today and therefore this passage does not forbid ordination of women to the ministry.<sup>19</sup>

The three passages that speak of the breaking down of barriers in Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:27-28; Col 3:9-11) all appear in baptismal contexts. Baptism is specifically mentioned in the context of the first two; and in the last, reference is made to putting off the old ways and putting on the new self that is concretized at baptism. Baptism is thus looked at as the great equalizer. When one is baptized in Christ, there is no longer male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. As Scroggs says, Christianity “acknowledged the societal-leveling quality of baptism. The very event of initiation into the Christian community destroys the barriers between groups out of which the old world had lived. As Michel comments on Colossians 3:10f, ‘In the event of baptism all national, religious and social oppositions among men in the old eon have been

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<sup>18</sup>David Scaer, “May Women Be Ordained as Pastors?” *Springfielder* 36 (1972): 89-109.

<sup>19</sup>Hommes, pp. 21-22.

overcome.’’<sup>20</sup> Baptism was the outward expression of one’s faith in Christ, but faith in Christ is the real leveler. In Judaism circumcision was the seal of the covenant. It was done to a male and it was a national rite. The Jew had an advantage; his birth was his birthright. But faith erased all advantages. Jew and Gentile, slave and master, male and female now stood on the same level. This is the genius of Christianity and makes it a universal religion in which all are equal. It is not a national religion, or one limited to one economic class, or to one sex. It is international, classless, and without sex bias in its basic insight.

With this insight we should couple (a) Christ’s call to all to be His witnesses, and (b) Adventist theology of the ministry. Adventists consider all members commissioned to proclaim the gospel. But in order to facilitate the proclamation of the gospel those who are specifically gifted and called for this task are set apart and supported by the rest so that they can spend their full time in this work and share their expertise with the others. This means that, in addition to commitment to a call, ability is really the only criterion by which selection to this office is determined. In a real sense sex should have nothing to do with this function. It is no more a male function than the ability to sing is a male function. It is only tradition and custom, not our doctrines or deliberate reflections, that have kept us from ordaining women to the ministry.

Adventists as a minority church also have a more democratic ethos than the older established churches. Traditionally the minority churches have been much more democratic and open in the role they have given to women. Ellen White is typical of this openness of the Adventist Church. It is not an accident that the Anglicans, the Orthodox, and Roman Catholic communions have been the slowest and the most conservative in giving full rights to women.

On the basis of the hermeneutical principle and theological reflections given above, it seems to this writer that the Spirit is directing the church to actualize in the work of the church the proleptic insight of Scripture that there is no longer male and female, but that all are one in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>20</sup>Robin Scroggs, “Paul and the Eschatological woman,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40 (1972): 292.