

The Culture of Thessalonica; Analysis of “Possess” & “Vessel” in 1 Thess 4:4: Hebrew & Greek Translations Indicate “Sexual Intercourse in Marriage”

The importance of abstinence being the behavior pattern and lifestyle of male believers is the subject of the next verse:

1 Thessalonians 4:4 - so that each of you know how to possess [κτάομαι, *ktaomai*] his own [ἐαυτός, *heautos*] vessel [σκευός, *skeuos*] in sanctification and honor,

v. 5 - not in passion and desire of sexual lust like the Gentiles who know not God.

This passage documents the virtue of rectitude and it is important to review its definition from:

Webster, Noah. *An American Dictionary of the English Language*. (New York: S. Converse, 1828). Facsimile of the first edition. (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1995), 2:52:

Rectitude. In *morality*, rightness of principle or practice; uprightness of mind; exact conformity to truth, or to the rules prescribed for moral conduct, either by divine or human laws. Rectitude of *mind* is the disposition to act in conformity to any known standard of right, truth or justice. Rectitude of *conduct* is the actual conformity to such standard. *Perfect rectitude* belongs only to the Supreme Being. The more nearly the rectitude of men approaches to the standard of the divine law, the more exalted and dignified is their character. Want of rectitude is not only sinful, but debasing.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5, Paul encourages sexual rectitude among believers in the church at Thessalonica. These were new believers who had learned a number of basic doctrines but still had quite a number of questions. Paul and Silas had to cut short their ministry there when the Jews of the city caused a public disturbance over their teachings. Concerned about the tender souls of these new believers, Paul dispatched Timothy to return to the city and prepare a situation report. Timothy’s assessment alerted Paul that the church needed to be both encouraged to continue its spiritual growth but also warned about the temptations that were prevalent throughout the city.

Thessalonica was a large metropolitan city situated at the head of the Gulf of Salonika \sa-lä'-ni-ka\. It was not only a major seaport but the famous Egnatian Way, the first-century equivalent of an interstate highway, ran through the city linking the Adriatic Sea to the west with Byzantium, or modern Istanbul, to the east. Like Corinth, this drew many immigrants into Thessalonica and with them their various cultures and religions. Common to the latter was a libertine view of sex:

NIV Archaeological Study Bible: *An Illustrated Walk through Biblical History and Culture*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 1946:

1 Thessalonians 4:3 (study note). A wide range of sexual values and practices existed in Paul’s day in both Greek and Roman society; moral standards were generally low, and chastity was regarded as an unreasonable restriction. Paul offered people from diverse backgrounds a sexual standard based on what they shared—a relationship with God.

Radmacher, Earl D. (gen. ed.). *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999), 1577:

4:3-8. A major problem for the early church was maintaining sexual purity (1 Corinthians 5:1, 9-11). Pagan religions often condoned sexual immorality as part of their rites, and ancient Roman culture had few sexual boundaries. In contrast, Paul strongly urged the Thessalonians not to participate in any sexual activity outside of marriage. He reminded them that the human body is God's temple and should be kept holy (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). The body should be honored as created by God and should be sanctified in keeping with its holy purpose. **Believers should have a personal passion for sexual purity that surpasses the passion that the world has for sexual experiences.** Sexual involvement outside of marriage dishonors God, one's marriage partner or future spouse, and even one's own body. There is always a price to pay, for God often allows Christians to reap what they sow.

The believer is warned to restrain his passions and desires in such a way that the sexual experience can be properly enjoyed with the one person for whom it is designed—the *right* person. Sexual purity not only includes abstinence but also its proper function with one's right person. Because of the lax attitudes about sex in Thessalonica, Paul extends this warning to the new believers in the city.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 contains the prohibition against sexual immorality by promoting abstinence. Verse 4 provides the alternative, “so that each of you knows how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor.”

The phrase that needs to be examined is **ἐαυτοῦ σκευός κτάσθαι, *eautou skeuos ktasthai***: “possess his own vessel.” In the Greek, the word “vessel” precedes the word “possess.” The word for “vessel” is *skeuos* and for that we turn to:

Friedrich, Gerhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 7:358; 365-66:

σκευός, [*skeuos*]. The noun means a vessel of any material serving a specific purpose: “vessel,” “container.” (p. 358)

1 Thessalonians 4:4 is much debated. From the time of the fathers [the outstanding theologians of at least the first six centuries after the apostles] two different interpretations have been proposed for σκευός [*skeuos*]: “body” and “wife.” In favor of the former a few parallels may be adduced from the Greek world in which the body is the container of the soul. In favor of the second, one may cite the Jewish euphemism whereby the woman is called a vessel. A further question is whether the present κτάσθαι [*ktasthai*] is to be given the ingressive sense “to gain” or whether it may have the durative sense normally expressed by the perfect, i.e., “to possess.” The former does not go at all with the meaning “body,” while the latter yields the sense “to have the body in one's power.” If σκευός [*skeuos*] refers to the woman then either the unmarried in Thessalonica are being urged to marry as a remedy against fornication (ingressive sense) or those who are married are being told to hold their own wives in esteem (durative sense). The best way is not to examine the two words individually but to relate the whole expression to the larger linguistic context and to consider the reciprocal interaction between Greek and Hebrew usage. (p. 365)

The point at which to begin is the Old Testament and Jewish **אֵשֶׁל בָּעַל** [*ba'al*: “to marry,” and *ishah*: “a wife”]. In the Old Testament **בָּעַל** [*ba'al*: “to marry,”] has two senses: 1. a. (ingressive) “to take possession; b. (durative) “to be lord, owner; 2. special with or without a woman as *the* object. a. (ingressive) “to woo a wife,” “to become lord and master in marriage”; b. (durative) “to possess a wife,” “to be a husband”. Since in the commencement and continuation of marriage according to Old Testament and Jewish law the beginning and continuation of sexual relations is an essential part, **בָּעַל** [*ba'al*: “to marry,”] ingressively refers not merely to marriage in general but specifically to the establishment of sexual intercourse as its basis. This is why at these and other places the LXX [Septuagint] translates **בָּעַל** [*ba'al*: “to marry,”] by **συνουκεῖν** [*sunoikein*] “to live in sexual fellowship, as married people.”

The durative form of **בָּעַל** [ba'al: "to marry,"], "the woman belonging to a man as wife," is translated by the LXX at Genesis 20:3 by, "the woman who has taken up (and continues in) sexual relations with a man." Thus **אִשָּׁה בָּעַל** [ba'al: "to marry," and *ishah*: "a wife"] come to mean "to take a woman sexually."

The fact that **בָּעַל** [ba'al: "to marry,"] and **κτάσθαι**, [*ktasthai*: "to possess"] are parallel suggests that Paul, who spoke both Hebrew and Greek, would translate the Hebrew technical term **אִשָּׁה בָּעַל** [ba'al: "to marry," and *ishah*: "a wife"] ("to possess a woman sexually") by **κτάσθαι**, [*ktasthai*: "to possess"] **γυναικα** [*gunaika*: "a woman"], thus imparting a durative sense to the Greek phrase. Under the influence of the Jewish euphemism he is led, then, to the new expression **σκευος κτάσθαι**, [*skeuos ktasthai*], "to use a woman as a vessel." (p. 366)

This is a Greek idiom for the sexual intercourse between right man and right woman and the first time the couple engages in the act is what constitutes and consummates their marriage.

The verb "to marry" and the noun "marriage" are presently suffering verbicide as their definitions are being watered down by the dissolution of Progressive ideology. The rationale offered by these proponents is that all individuals have the right to marry whom they please. But historically from Eden to the late twentieth century the definition has reflected the biblical standard. Take for example Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary:

Webster, Noah, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, 2:12:

MARRIAGE. The act of uniting a man and woman for life; wedlock; the legal union of a man and woman for life. Marriage is a contract both civil and religious, by which the parties engage to live together in mutual affection and fidelity, till death shall part them. Marriage was instituted by God Himself for the purpose of preventing the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, for promoting domestic felicity, and for securing the maintenance and education of children.