

Authentein – A Word Study

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One of the key passages in understanding the role of man and woman according to the Scriptures must surely be Paul's directive to Timothy, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent"(1 Ti 2:12).

Over the years this passage has always evoked considerable exegetical discussion, but there was general agreement as to the meaning of the three key terms taken individually, i.e., to teach, to exercise authority, and to be silent. Of late, however, all three have come in for renewed study and reevaluation, also in our circles. Particularly the second term, *authentein*, which seems to be central to the whole passage because in it Paul is enunciating the underlying principle involved, has come under intense scrutiny. It has been suggested that the traditional translations following the basic idea of *exercise authority* may be totally wide of the mark and that a radically different meaning for that verb may hold the key to a proper understanding of the passage.

Evidence for the traditional translation goes back to the earliest centuries of Christendom, Some translations are a bit more pointed than others, following the KJV's lead of "usurping authority" and hence rendering it "dictate"(Moffatt) or "domineer"(NEB), but most use the lower-keyed "have authority" or "exercise authority." Luther translated "*des Mannes Herr sein.*" The Vulgate, reflecting a tradition going back to the old Latin (2 cen. A.D.) renders the term *dominari*.

Recently it has been suggested in an article entitled, "Ancient heresies and a strange Greek verb," by Catherine C. Kroeger¹ that the verb is really a technical term with an erotic connotation that might best be rendered with a translation such as "to engage in fertility practices." If this can be established, then Paul's directive to Timothy will obviously take on quite a different meaning.

How can so radically different a meaning be suggested? The problem is threefold. First of all, *authentein* is a *hapax legomenon*, i.e., it is-used only here in the Scriptures. One is therefore forced to turn to extrabiblical sources for additional occurrences of the term. That search indicates that the verb *authentein* is very rarely used before patristic times, and hence one is compelled to include cognate terms in the study, notably the noun *authentēs*. Finally, establishing the meaning for this family of words is complicated by the fact that there is no agreement on its etymology.

Obviously the word is a compound, with *autos* ("self") forming the first part. The disagreement centers on the second half. The grammarian Phrynichus (180 A.D.) suggested that the second member was from *hentos*, a form of *hiemi* ("send" or "thrust"). In commenting on the meaning of the verb he pointed out that it should not be used of the activity of a tyrant, but that it denotes rather "murder by one's own hand."

In fact, so consistently do the contexts that surround the early uses of this word suggest murder and suicide, that there have always been those who have insisted that the word really is a compound of *autos* and *theino*(kill). Note, for example, the present studies of the French scholar Pierre Chantraine who analyzes it as a compound of *autos* and *thanatos*.²

From patristic times there are literally hundreds of instances where there emerges unmistakably the meaning: "thrusting oneself forward, asserting oneself, acting as lord and master." The fact that Phrynichus finds it necessary to warn against this meaning actually establishes the fact that the meaning "to tyrannize, to lord it over another" was in fact the understanding of *authentein* held by a considerable number in the second century.

With these two strains of meaning vying so strongly with one another, it will perhaps not surprise us to hear the suggestion made that both *hiemi* and *theino* have had their input into *authentein* and that we have here a case of "haplology," i.e., one word with two different etymologies, thus allowing the two diverse meanings of "to murder" or, "to dominate." P. Kretschmer in his oft-cited article in "Glotta" is of the opinion "*dasz hier zwei Woerter verschiedenen Ursprungs lautlich zusammengefallen sind.*"⁴

The upshot of all this is that we can not depend on etymology to determine the meaning of *authentein* and *authentēs* for us. We must look closely at the context. It is the basic thesis of this study that the various

passages cited by Kroeger do not require or support the sexual connotation that she suggests for the forms of *authentēs*, but that the two anciently-attested meanings of “to murder” and “to dominate” fit very well in all instances.

The Kroeger article opens by agreeing with the basic meaning of “murder.” It states:

The Attic orator Antiphon used the term *authentēs* to mean “murderer” in four different instances in legal briefs of murder cases and once to mean suicide, as did Dio Cassius. Thucydides, Herodotus, and Aeschylus also use the word to denote one who slays with his own hand, and so does Euripides.⁵

It is in Euripides, however, that the author claims to find a new development. “In Euripides the word begins to take on a sexual tinge,” she asserts, and her reference is to a use of the noun *authentēs* in the tragedy, *Andromache*.⁶ Andromache the widow of Hector, has become the captive and concubine of Neoptolemus whose jealous wife Hermione berates the unfortunate slave-girl, “You wretch, who dare to sleep with the son of the man who killed your husband and bear children to the *authentēs*!” To be sure, there are clear sexual overtones in the passage, but those thoughts lie in the explicit expressions “to sleep with” and “to bear children.” The parallelism in the context suggests that the *authentēs* to whom the children are born is a “murderer,” and without pressing the normal meaning, also her “lord” and “master.” *Authentes* need not have any sexual connotation here.

Her second example of *authentēs* from Euripides is perhaps even more tenuous. She says, “The word also occurs in a homosexual sense in a speech by Theseus, king of Athens, where love of young boys was considered a virtue rather than a vice.”⁷

The reference is undoubtedly to Theseus’ speech in the *Suppliants*. Recall that the suppliant women are the women of Argos, mothers of the slain “seven against Thebes.” When the victorious Theban tyrant refuses to allow proper burial for the slain “seven,” Theseus, king of Athens, standard bearer of democracy, appears on the scene to set things right. In his challenge to the Theban herald he says:

There’s nothing more sinister for a city than tyrants,
 Where first of all there are not any laws in common;
 There one man, keeping laws unwritten, holds the rule
 Himself unto himself, and power is not equal.
 But where the laws are written down both weak and strong,
 Both rich and poor, have equal power and equal right.
 What’s more fair than this?
 And truly where the people run the government
 They are rejoiced by good young citizens coming up.⁸

The discussion centers on the last two lines. Literally the text says, “Where the populace is *authentēs*(master), there they rejoice in good young citizens.” There is a variant here (*euthentes*), but in either case the sense is virtually the same. If Kroeger is correct in assuming the reading *authentēs* (and I think she is), then we have here a 5th cen. B.C. usage that unmistakably establishes the meaning “to be lord, to be master of” —and that in the face of the fact that the author tries to prove that the word does not mean “exercise authority” until the third and fourth centuries A.D., well after the New Testament era.

The other matter is that of sexuality in the context. Granted that love of boys was a vice in Athens, yet in our passage which turns exclusively on a debate involving the relative merits of two forms of government, it seems precarious in the extreme to say that in a democracy which *hedetai neaniais* (rejoices in young men), there must be an allusion to homosexual behavior. The antitheses between “democratic thinking” and the

“tyrannical mind-set” becomes particularly obvious if we include the lines immediately following upon the democracy’s “pleasure” in good young citizens:

The absolute king regards this as a dangerous state;
 He kills the best man who he thinks have minds they use;
 He is afraid his tyranny will not endure

It may also be misleading or even suggestive of a wrong understanding when the article cites grammarians’ evaluations of *authenthein* as a “coarse” and “objectionable” term. The author states: Moeris, also in the second century, advised his students to use another word, *autodikein*, as it was less coarse than *authenthein*. The Byzantine Thomas Magister reiterates the warning against this objectionable term.⁹

Moeris was an “Atticist, a purist bent on restoring the Greek language to the elegance it formerly had in the golden age of Athens. Hence he lines up synonyms in parallel columns, suggesting which ones properly reflect Attic elegance and which fall short. *Autodikein* he approves as “Attic”(attikos), whereas *authenthein* is disparaged as being *hellenikos*.

Thomas Magister does the same. He urges, “Say *autodikein*, not *authenthein*, for the latter is *koinoteron*,” i.e. more characteristic of the *koine* or common speech —“vulgar” if you will. But there is no implication that *authenthein* is a dirty word, charged with sexual or indecent connotations.

Another example that appears to have the earmarks of sex being injected into the context, rather than its being inherent in it, is the author’s treatment of the *Wisdom of Solomon*, where at 12:6 the expression *authentas goneis* occurs. She asserts that this usage occurs “in the midst of a discussion of the abominable fertility and mystery rites of the Canaanites.”¹⁰ Again, this seems to be an overstatement when viewed in the light of the immediate context.

No one will deny that much of Canaanite culture and religion was shot through with the vilest of sexual practices, but that is not the point of the discussion here. “Solomon’s” emphasis is rather on God’s grace and goodness—that he does not move in haste, even against those who deserve it, Hence he states:

But you spare all, because they are yours, Lord, lover of life,
 For your imperishable spirit is in all things.
 Therefore you correct little by little those who go astray,
 And you admonish them by reminding them of the things
 through which they sin;
 So that they may escape from their wickedness and believe
 in you, Lord.
 For those who long ago inhabited your holy land
 You hated for acting most hatefully,
 Practicing enchantments and unholy rites,
 Merciless killing of children,
 And cannibal feasting on human flesh and blood.
 Initiates from the midst of a pagan brotherhood,
 And parents who were *authentas* of helpless lives,
 You determined to destroy by the hand of our forefathers,
 So that the land which you prized above all others
 Might receive a worthy colony of God’s children.
 But even these, as being men, you spared,
 And you sent wasps as forerunners of your host,
 To destroy them little by little. (11:25-12:8, Goodspeed trans.)¹¹

On balance, the passage under discussion is not an explicit delineation of Canaanite sexual sins. It seems more likely that the heathen vice particularly in view is that of Moloch worship and human sacrifice. The “merciless killing of children and cannibal feasting on human flesh and blood” seems naturally to suggest as its counterpart “parents who were murderers (*authentas*) of helpless lives.”

To draw support for her sexually oriented interpretation of “procreating souls doomed to everlasting damnation” the author reaches back eight chapters to an unrelated portion of the book and adduces 3:10-4:6. All in all, the evidence for an erotic interpretation of *authentas* here seems unconvincing. The more usual translation of “murderers,” which virtually all translators adopt, rather than “procreators,” has much to commend it.

Perhaps enough examples have been adduced to support the thesis that sexual implications are not necessary in translating the various forms of *authentein*, but that a choice between the two “standard” though not wholly antithetical meanings of “to murder” and “to dominate” really work very well in all cases. Other examples could be added, from Clement, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, etc., (which can be refuted in the same) but we shall let these suffice.¹²

There is, however, one passage which, while admittedly very late (XII A.D.) is nevertheless at first sight seemingly so supportive of the Kroger interpretation, that we might be faulted if no mention were made of it. We refer to the account by the Byzantine historiographer Michael Glycas who “uses this verb to describe women ‘who make *sexual advances* to men and fornicate as much as they please without arousing their husbands’ jealousy,” it as Kroeger translates it.¹³

The normal understanding of the material as presented by the author would seem to be that *porneuoussin* (fornicate) is a commentary and gives the meaning of *authentousi*, which could then fairly be translated as “make sexual advances on.” But the author has quoted only half of the original sentence!

To get our bearings: Michael Glycas is a historian with a special penchant for social comment. In the section under discussion he is speaking of the sexual mores of individual nations. The people under discussion at the moment are the *Agilairoi*. That he inserts a discussion of their customs between those of the Chaldeans and the inhabitants of Britannia is not particularly helpful either for identifying them ethnically or locating them geographically. But that is of no consequence. The point of Michael’s account is rather a striking reversal of roles among them. Translated literally, he says:

Among the Agilaeans(?) the women *authentousi* the men/their husbands and fornicate as much as they please, without being resented by the men/their husbands, and they carry on farming, build houses, and pursue all masculine activities (ανδροα).¹⁴

Taken in its full context, it becomes obvious that it is not merely *porneuoussin* (fornicate) that is a commentary on *authentousi* but *prattoussin georgian kai oikodomian kai panta ta androa* as well. All four are special applications or manifestations of the general term *authentousi*. The basic concept set forth is that of role-reversal. The women *dominate* the men. And this shows itself in various aspects: in their sex-life, in their trades and economic patterns, and in all other social pursuits as well. Again, understanding *authentein* as “to dominate, to lord it over” fits very well. In fact, it seems to be required by the context.

Far from overturning the traditional understanding of *authentein* in First Timothy, the use by Michael Glycas seems rather to be a total parallel to Paul’s use of the term. With *authentein* the apostle expresses the general principle. The woman is not to exercise authority over the man. Whatever activity or pursuits would tend to overturn that order of things is to be avoided. In writing to Timothy, the specific application of the principle or the area in which Paul realized that an overturning was most likely to happen, was in the area of teaching. Hence he warns against it. If he had been writing to the Agilaeans, he might well have applied the principle with a directive against farming and house-building as well.