

NOTATIONS ON 1 TIMOTHY 2:11-12

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Does αὐθεντεῖν mean “exercise authority” or “domineer”?

(a) The law of contrast implies that αὐθεντεῖν does not mean “dominate” since it is a correlative term with ὑποταγή in the previous verse. Ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ and αὐθεντεῖν seem to be correlative expressions like *learn* and *teach*, with which they appear. Correlative terms stand in a common larger category as natural contrasts: lost-saved, father-son, prophecy-fulfillment, faith-works, and the like. Within the same context the sense in which one is meant is the sense in which the other is used. If *father* means physical father, then *son* means physical son, not spiritual son. If *prophecy* means to state a significant principle, then *fulfill* means to be an example of that principle, not the occurrence of a prediction. Correlative terms obey the law of contrast/opposition/negation inside the law of harmony.

Correlative terms and the law of contrast may help establish the meaning of αὐθεντεῖν in this passage. Since it appears only once in the New Testament, scholars in women’s studies have diligently collected examples of the word in other settings. The difficulty with the results of such painstaking research is that the evidence for an intense, negative connotation (“domineer,” “murder”) may be due more to their differing contexts than to the conventional meaning of the word itself. Besides, usages drawn from across several centuries run the risk of lexical drift. Observations on derivation, constituent morphemes, and cognate words are likewise helpful but not satisfactory because word meanings are established by usage more than derivation, constituents, and related terms.

Appealing to the law of contrast with correlating terms cuts through the ambiguous and conflicting results of these other procedures. Contrast suggests that αὐθεντεῖν does not have a negative connotation, because being in subjection does not have a connotation. If αὐθεντεῖν means “dominate” or “be autocratic,” we would expect ἐν πάσῃ ὑποταγῇ to mean “in reticence.” The contrast would be between dominating and not dominating. The dignity of all human persons requires that ὑποταγή bear a positive connotation in parent-children and husband-wife relationships. It means associating with the other person in a way that recognizes that the other person is the being held responsible. The law of contrast creates the expectancy that αὐθεντεῖν means “exercise authority over.”

(b) In a second application of the law of contrast, we would expect a contrast between deferring and not deferring, rather than between deferring and “domineeringly” not deferring. In contrast to the previous entry about unlike connotations, the point here is that the “size” of the ideas is not the same. One category (deference) is set in contrast to a subdivision of the opposite category (oversee domineeringly).

(c) Likewise, the law of harmony implies that αὐθεντεῖν does not mean “dominate” since it pairs with διδάσκειν. This observation holds true especially if the verbs are parallel rather than conflated. If the two verbs express one composite idea, however, the whole could have a negative feel (“to teach with a domineering air”), although the prohibition seems too specific for the flow of the text. Furthermore, a negative composite idea would run counter again to expectancy from the law of contrast with correlative terms. The negative expression “teach

domineeringly” would not naturally contrast with the neutral expression “*be in complete deference,*” or perhaps “*be in deference in everything.*”

(d) The law of harmony implies that ἀθεντεῖν does not mean dominate, since ἀθεντεῖν plus “teach” parallels the distinctive roles of elders given in the next paragraph.

(e) We would expect Paul to warn men not to be domineering toward women, because that is surely a more common problem. In his household teaching (Ephesians 5:22-6:11; Colossians 3:18-4:1; and 1 Timothy 6:1-3), he warns in each case against the typical faults of each member. Peter follows the same pattern in his first epistle (2:18-3:7). Such would not be the case here if ἀθεντεῖν carried a negative implication.

(f) No one should be domineering toward anyone else. Paul would not specify that women not be domineering over men when there is no reason to single them out.

(g) Assuming a neutral connotation for ἀθεντεῖν would conform to the principle of minimum affirmation. The more precise meaning requires more precise evidence.

For these contextual reasons, it is more natural to adopt the reading “exercising authority over” rather than “domineer.”

Because of derivation and some uses that mean “murder,” researchers often conclude that ἀθεντεῖν connotes intensity and therefore domineering leadership. Perhaps, however, the implication about intensive degree is not in the manner but the level of exercising authority. The implication would not be negative but final. It would mean exercising final authority. It would not then be a synonym for (κατα)κυριεύω (note Matthew 20:25; Luke 22:25; 2 Corinthians 1:24). “Exercising final authority” would fit our conviction that Paul is talking about women not exercising authority over men in the final slots of home and church.

Although the word is paired with a neutral term, it could in effect have a negative turn because of a special feature of role-reversal. A writer might mean that when women try to exercise authority over men, it comes off as domineering because it is unnatural both to them and observers. The women would be straining to do what “goes against the grain,” something that feels “backwards” and uncomfortable for them. New or inadequate people in authority positions often come on too strong because they are compensating for that sense of inadequacy. The phenomenon shows up with new husbands, parents who have children they feel they cannot control, policemen new to the job, people trying to lead in the face of prejudice, and so on. Paul’s point would be, “*I don’t let women oversee men because in effect it becomes domineering.*” The likelihood of such a take is a matter of judgment. Paul does do something similar in his comment about young widows “*being drawn away by sensuous impulses*” (1 Timothy 5:11). An interpreter would be more apt to take this tack on 2:11-12 as wisdom rather than law. Wisdom would allow it to be a generality or significant possibility, which makes it a more likely true observation Paul could mean.

Another way the law of contrast with correlative terms would not require ἀθεντεῖν to bear a neutral connotation is to suppose there is a contrast between abuse and correct use. Paul would then be saying, “*Do not domineer; be in subjection.*” The first is a corrective on the second; so there would be a natural pairing: correct vs. incorrect.

Are “teach” and “exercise authority” two verbs for one composite idea—teach authoritatively?

Teaching and ruling are the two distinctive activities of elders, the listing of whose characteristics is Paul's next topic. If he is anticipating that subject, the two verbs are not as likely to form one composite idea. Teaching and ruling are two responsibilities in the eldership role, and they would be operating at different times. There is ruling that occurs aside from teaching, which means the two are not a composite; hence, they are not a composite in 2:12. If we take the two verbs as one composite idea, we do not connect them with the distinctive responsibilities of elders.

Even if we do not conflate the verbs, context indicates that Paul meant authoritative teaching because he contrasts teaching with subjection expressed by quietness.

Examples of two verbs for one composite idea include Acts 10:46 (*"They began to speak in languages and magnify God"*), Acts 19:6 (*"They spoke with languages and prophesied"*), and Revelation 2:20 (*"She teaches and seduces my servants to commit adultery"*).

Is Paul being descriptive or prescriptive when he says, *"I do not allow a woman normatively to teach a man"*?

Although the form of statement is descriptive, its meaning could be prescriptive. In 2:8 Paul says similarly, *"I want men in every place to pray. . . ."* Likewise, Titus 3:8 says, *"I want you confidently to affirm these things so that they who have believed in God may be careful about maintaining good works."* On the other hand, 1 Timothy 5:14 says, *"I want younger widows to remarry . . ."*; and Philippians 1:12 says, *"I want you to know that . . ."*

Is 2:11-12 a statement born of wisdom or is it a command that would be disobeyed? (See "Wisdom or Law?")

Taking it as wisdom is a lesser affirmation. As wisdom, **(a)** it could be a strong generality, a policy based on relative gifting (statistical by degree), and could envision standard situation only. Wisdom would allow it to be based on cultural and situational factors in addition to relative gifting. As wisdom, **(b)** it could be said because male deference at church would not fit well with female deference at home. As wisdom, **(c)** the "reason(s)" given in 2:13-14 as well as elsewhere are reasons for wisdom rather than reasons for law; they are reasons for advice against risk, not command against disobedience.

Taking these verses as wisdom rather than will-of-God and connecting them with elders' distinctive qualifications would imply that women could serve as elders. If women elders are unacceptable, either 2:11-12 is will-of-God unto disobedience or the verses do not connect with chapter 3.

Taking these verses as wisdom rather than will-of-God forfeits husband headship in marriage, because headship reversals would have to occur between home and church in some cases. Since husband headship is not negotiable, then neither is male eldership and its equivalents; and these verses are not just wisdom but law—in standard situations, at least.

From the standpoint of wisdom, the wisdom of not having women normatively teaching men could be that the home is structured in the opposite order. The house connection in the context comes in the last verse of chapter 2 and in the appeals to the order of creation. The wisdom of not having women normatively teaching men also comes in connection with relative gifting. The contextual connection comes with the deception in the fall, the implication being

that women are not as adept at holistic thinking, being more narrowly referenced. They have a more difficult time keeping the affective element distinct from the rational.

Is 2:11-12 situational or general? See essay entitled “1 Timothy 2:8-15: Situational or General?”

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