

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8: The Thessalonians should live a holy life

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Abstract

The author argues that 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 should be considered as one coherent pericope. It shows that the term “holiest” does not refer to the god “Kabeiros”, neither that the Greek word “skeuos” means either “spouse” or referring to the male sexual organ. It rather means “body”. The article aims to argue that 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 is a passage in which Paul urges the Thessalonians to be always pure in body and mind. Thus explained, the pericope fits in with the preceding text about the Thessalonians’ holiness at the parousia (3:13) and it prepares for the next paragraph in which the parousia of the Lord with the holy people (3:13) is discussed more thoroughly (1 Th 4:13-5:11).

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 Paul gives several ethical exhortations. These exhortations are meant to support the Thessalonians on their way to their meeting with the Lord (1 Th 4:17). It is the verses 1-8 that will be the focus in this paper. We are confronted with several exegetical problems in this pericope. The most important are the meaning of the clause τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι in vs 4 and the interpretation of the prepositional phrase ἐν τῷ πράγματι in vs 6. In my opinion these phrases do not refer to totally different subjects. The whole pericope must be explained as one coherent reasoning on how to live a holy life.²

I will discuss this pericope and I will elaborate with respect to 4:4. It is sometimes argued that Paul refers to concrete abuses in the church of Thessaloniki (Galani 1985:255; Lambrecht 1994:352-353). But in my opinion

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² I take for granted the integrity of 1 Thessalonians; cf Verhoef (1998:28-33). But see Richard (1995:11-19).

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we cannot deduce from this section that the Christian community of Thessaloniki failed on these points.³ I will argue that the exhortations which are given here serve to prepare the Thessalonians for the parousia. Paul wants the Thessalonians to live a holy life in order to always be with the Lord; see 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18.

2. SOME REMARKS ON 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-2

The beginning of this pericope is marked by λοιπὸν οὖν, furthermore then.⁴ In several manuscripts the preceding paragraph, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, is concluded with the word ἀμήν, which confirms that a new section starts in 4:1.⁵ The words λοιπὸν οὖν suggest that Paul is not going to discuss a very controversial issue, but he asks the Thessalonians to live according to the commandments he gave them.⁶

3. GOD WANTS THE THESSALONIANS TO BE HOLY; 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3-8.

In the verses 3-8 Paul specifies more exactly what he means. First I will give the Greek text (Aland 1993:53) with my own translation and then we shall study these verses more thoroughly.

(3) Τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ ἁγιασμός ὑμῶν, ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας, (4) εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, (5) μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδόντα τὸν θεόν, (6) τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, διότι ἕκδικος κύριος περὶ πάντων τούτων, καθὼς καὶ προείπαμεν ὑμῖν καὶ διεμαρτυράμεθα. (7) οὐ γὰρ ἐκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς ὁ θεός ἐπὶ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ ἀλλ' ἐν ἁγιασμῷ. (8) τοιγαροῦν ὁ ἀθετῶν οὐκ ἄνθρωπον ἀθετεῖ ἀλλὰ τὸν θεὸν τὸν καὶ διδόντα τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ τὸ ἅγιον εἰς ὑμᾶς.

(3) This is the will of God, your holiness: that you abstain from fornication, (4) that each one of you knows to have control over his body in holiness and in honour, (5) not in covetous passion as also

³ The same applies to 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12, but these verses are beyond the scope of my paper.

⁴ Cf the use of the same words in two epistles published in *Aegyptische Urkunden aus den koeniglichen Museen zu Berlin* 4 1912:122.123.

⁵ In rhetorical studies 1 Thessalonians 4:1 is seen as the beginning of the probatio; see for example Jewett (1986:75.221); Hughes (1990:104).

⁶ For the use of ἐρωτάω and παρακαλέω next to each other see the example given by Deissmann (1923:134).

do the pagans who do not know God, (6) not to pass over and put at a disadvantage his brother in this matter, because God punishes all such things, as we told you before and as we witnessed. (7) For God did not call us for impurity, but in order to live in holiness. (8) Thus, anyone who rejects this, does not reject a man but he rejects the God who gives you his Holy Spirit.

3.1 THEY SHOULD ABSTAIN FROM FORNICATION, 1 THESSALONIANS 4:3

The first word of verse 3, the demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο, refers to ὁ ἁγιασμός ὑμῶν, your holiness. It is used as a predicate here.⁷ Θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, the will of God, is the subject of this sentence (Von Dobschütz 1909:159; Holtz 1986:154).⁸ God's will is that the Thessalonians be holy. This interpretation clarifies the connection with the preceding clauses. Θέλημα refers back to τὸ πῶς δεῖ ὑμᾶς περιπατεῖν καὶ ἀρέσκειν θεῷ, how you must conduct yourselves and please God (vs 1), and to παραγγελία, command (vs 2). Paul summoned the Thessalonians to live according to the commandments he gave them in order to please God. In verse 3 it is said that the addressees should be holy according to God's will.

The noun ἁγιασμός is related to the verb ἁγιάζω that is in its turn derived from the adjective ἅγιος. In the New Testament this adjective is used in the meaning "consecrated to God" and then "holy" (Liddell & Scott 1968:9). Paul used ἅγιος for example for people who joined the Christian community; cf Phlp 4:21-22. The verbs ending with -αζω usually have a causative meaning (Moulton & Howard 1920:404-406), in this case "to make holy" or "to consecrate". Nomina actionis were often made from these verbs by the suffix -μός (Blass & Debrunner & Rehkopf 1984:§109). Consequently the noun ἁγιασμός means "consecration", "sanctification". But it has also a passive meaning: holiness (Bauer & Aland 1988:15). The noun ἁγιασμός is specified in the verses 3-6 in three infinitival sentences which must be interpreted appositionally to ἁγιασμός (Von Dobschütz 1909:161):

1. ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας, that you abstain from fornication (1 Thess. 4:3);
2. εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας καθάπερ καὶ τὰ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ εἰδότα τὸν

⁷ Cf John 6:39.40 where we read τοῦτο δέ ἐστιν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πέμψαντός με and τοῦτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός μου respectively. In both verses these words are followed by a subordinate clause introduced by ἵνα.

⁸ For the lack of the article before the first noun, see Blass & Debrunner & Rehkopf (1984:§259).

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θεόν, that each one of you knows to have control over his body in holiness and in honour, not in covetous passion as the pagans, who do not know God (1 Thess. 4:4-5);

3. τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, not to pass over and put at a disadvantage his brother in this matter (1 Thess. 4:6).

The meaning of the first clause, ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας, is clear. Fornication, adultery should not occur in Christian life. The noun πορνεία refers to every kind of sexual immorality. It is used three times in 1 Cor. 5-6 and there it is related to specific sins of the Corinthians. In Gal. 5:19 πορνεία is mentioned in a list of punishable “works of the flesh”. In 1 Thess. 4:3 Paul asks the Thessalonians to abstain from fornication. As I said above Paul does not introduce a very controversial issue. He includes these admonitions in this chapter because πορνεία was found in every big city including Thessaloniki. But people of high moral standing should abstain from fornication.

3.2 They should have control over their bodies in holiness and in honour, 1 Thessalonians 4:4

The sentence εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι, that each one of you knows to have control over his body, is very much discussed. The verb εἰδέναι means here “to know how” (to do something) (cf the French verb “savoir”). Bornemann proposed to put a comma after σκεῦος and to interpret εἰδέναι as “to respect”. The second part of this verse would then point to how to do business (Bornemann 1894:170-171). The problem is that this produces two very short puzzling phrases which are difficult to explain.⁹ In several manuscripts these words are rendered in a different order: εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν κτᾶσθαι τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος.¹⁰ With such a word order Bornemann’s interpretation is even impossible. The verb κτᾶσθαι usually has the meaning “to acquire”, “to obtain”. In the perfect tense it means “to have acquired”, “to possess”, “to be master of”. Though the meaning “to acquire” is more common for the present tense, several examples can be given where we should accept a durative meaning, to possess. Jay Smith collected many examples of texts where in his opinion κτᾶσθαι should be interpreted with a durative meaning (Smith 2001a:83-85). But Smith is certainly too optimistic in his survey. He includes for example Isaiah 57:13 (LXX) and Sir 22:23. However, these texts cannot be used in this regard because the verb κτᾶσθαι does probably not

⁹ See the rejection of this proposal by Rigaux (1956:503).

¹⁰ Tischendorf (1872:759) mentioned D E F^{gr} G d e g go syr^{sch}.

have a durative meaning there. Moreover, Smith does not differentiate between present, aorist and future.¹¹

Let us look at some texts in which the present tense of the verb κτᾶσθαι does have the durative meaning “to possess”. In one of Aesop’s fables a trumpet player was seized by soldiers. He asked them not to kill him for two reasons. First of all he himself had never killed anyone and secondly, apart from his trumpet he did not possess anything: πλὴν γὰρ τούτου τοῦ χαλκοῦ οὐ κτῶμαι ἄλλο (Chambry 1926:519). In later times many more fables were included in Aesop’s writings. Therefore it is rather difficult to determine the date of this text (Luzzatto & Witte 1996:364). In any case the phrase quoted above is a clear example of the present tense with a durative meaning. In Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* 1.77 it is said that prudence is in the possession of God, who created it and possesses it, τοῦ δημιουργοῦ καὶ κτωμένου θεοῦ. In Josephus, *Antiquitates* 19, 248 we read that some of the officials did not want to stay in uncertainty with respect to their security whereas they were in possession of the dignity of their fathers, κτώμενοι τὸ ἀξίωμα τῶν πατέρων περὶ τῆς σωτηρίας ἀμφίβολοι καταστῆναι. In these texts the present tense of the verb κτᾶσθαι has clearly a durative meaning. The objects that people have in possession can vary from a trumpet to prudence or a specific quality. With respect to 1 Thessalonians 4:4 we can only conclude at this moment that the infinitive of the present tense can have the meaning “to possess” next to the more usual meaning “to acquire”. It is the context that is decisive. What can be the meaning of σκεῦος here? Three interpretations are defended:

- 1) Some authors argue that σκεῦος is used here for the male sexual organ.
- 2) Other scholars propose to explain σκεῦος as “wife”.
- 3) A third group, to which I belong, defends that σκεῦος must be interpreted as “body” (Verhoef 1998:169-172; Rigaux 1956:503-504; Marxsen 1979:60-61; Richard 1995:198).

If σκεῦος is interpreted as the sexual organ or as the body an inchoative sense of κτᾶσθαι, to acquire, does not make sense. If σκεῦος points to “wife” there is a remote possibility that the verb κτᾶσθαι has the meaning “to obtain”.

¹¹ For the differences between these tenses see Turner (1963:74-81); Schwyzer & Debrunner (1988:297-301).

3.2.1 Σκεῦος in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 interpreted as the male sexual organ

The first interpretation I mentioned is that σκεῦος is used for the male sexual organ. This interpretation is defended for example by Elgvin, Légasse, Smith and Van Houwelingen (Elgvin 1997:604-619; Légasse 1999:209-218; Smith 2001a:65-105; Smith 2001b:499-504; Van Houwelingen 2002:117-120). In general these authors argue in the following way. They refer to the rather enigmatic text of 4Q416 2 II.21 where it is said: do not treat with dishonour כלי־היקבה,¹² the vessel of your bosom. The meaning of these words is not very clear. The authors mentioned above argue that כלי is used here “as a euphemism for the male organ” (Elgvin 1997:607).¹³ Subsequently they state that the Greek σκεῦος is often used as an equivalent for the Hebrew כלי. And so the meaning “male sexual organ” would be plausible in 1 Thessalonians 4:4. But Smith himself writes: “uncertainties surrounding the text of 4Q416 2 II.21 render any specific identification of the meaning of כלי in this scroll provisional” (Smith 2001b:504).¹⁴ And even if this interpretation of 4Q416 2 II.21 were right, it is doubtful if this clarifies 1 Thessalonians 4:4, a text addressed to the Christian community in a Greek city. In any case this does not constitute a real parallel of the phrase τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι. And no matter how the readers of 4Q416 may have understood these Hebrew words, it is very improbable that the people of Thessaloniki would have interpreted Paul’s words against the background of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the whole of Greek literature only two texts have been found in which the noun σκεῦος is used for the male sexual organ, one by Antistius from the first century (Aubreton & Buffière 1980:172-173) and one by Aelianus from the third century (Jacobs 1832:378). This rare use of σκεῦος does not make probable that Paul used this word in the same way.¹⁵ Smith gives several examples of texts where ἀγγεῖον or the Latin noun “vas” is used as a euphemism for the genitalia (Smith 2001a:94-95). But these examples do not prove anything for the interpretation of the noun σκεῦος.

¹² This is presumably the right reading (cf Garcia Martinez 1998:850-851). But it could also be read כלי־חוקקה, your ordained vessel (see Vermes 1998:406). Wold (2005:191-202) wrote exhaustively about this Qumran text.

¹³ Elgvin refers to the use of כלי in I Samuel 21:6, but the meaning of this word there itself is questionable (cf also Van Houwelingen 2002:119).

¹⁴ Cf Légasse (1999:213) on 4Q416 2 II.21: “Il est cependant difficile d’argumenter à partir d’un fragment privé de son contexte et qui en lui-même demeure obscur ...”

¹⁵ However, Légasse (1999:217) speaks on the ground of these two authors of “un usage courant”.

Another point that complicates this interpretation is that the words ἕκαστον ὑμῶν, each one of you, seem to indicate that the whole community is addressed, not just the male part of the Thessalonian church. One could argue that, theoretically σκεῦος can perhaps point to the female sexual organ as well but as long as we do not have any clear examples for such a use it seems wise to be cautious with such an interpretation. Either way the words ἕκαστον ὑμῶν do not give a decisive argument, but they do at least suggest that Paul speaks here to the whole Christian community in Thessaloniki.

Last but not least it seems questionable if Paul can be expected to speak in this way about the male sexual organ. Such a use of σκεῦος might be possible in colloquial speech, but is very unusual in written language. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul speaks about the relation between the two sexes. He states in 1 Corinthians 7:2 that every man should have his own wife and every woman should have her own husband in order to avoid fornication. In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul speaks in a more general way. He does not reply to questions here as he does in 1 Corinthians 7. But he gives the general exhortation that they should be holy. It belongs to holiness that they avoid fornication. An unclear reference to the male sexual organ would be very strange in such a passage. Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12 about less honourable parts of the body is sometimes used as a comparable euphemistic description of the genitalia (Elgvin 1997:618; Smith 2001b:504). However, the scope of 1 Corinthians 12 is not sexuality but the church where everybody has his own function. Moreover, Paul does not use the noun σκεῦος in 1 Corinthians 12. I conclude that the interpretation of σκεῦος as the male sexual organ cannot be upheld.

3.2.2 Σκεῦος in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 explained as wife

Strugnell and Konradt argued that the noun σκεῦος in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 should be interpreted as “wife” (Strugnell 1996:537-547; Konradt 2001:128-135). They point to 4Q416 2 II.21, the same text that I mentioned above, and they argue in the following way. The words כְּלִי הַיְקָבָה are interpreted to have the same meaning as אִשְׁתְּ הַיְקָבָה, your beloved wife, in 4Q416 2 IV.5; cf Deuteronomy 13:7. Strugnell says about 4Q416 2 II.21 that this text “shows that, just like כְּלִי, τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος at least could mean ‘his own wife’ and not just ‘his own body’” (Strugnell 1996:540; cf Malherbe 2000:227). But in my opinion this Qumran text does not show anything regarding the Greek words τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος. Up till now we have not found any text where σκεῦος means “woman”. Konradt as well thinks that כְּלִי הַיְקָבָה in 4Q416 points to “someone’s wife” but he is more cautious regarding the use of 4Q416 for the

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interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:4.¹⁶ We saw that the meaning of this Wisdom text is very questionable itself. I sketched above how Elgvin and Smith used the same text to support another interpretation. It could also be asked why the author of 4Q416 2 II.21 did not say here אשת היקבה as we read in IV.5, if he really wanted to refer to someone's wife. Rightly Konradt states that the context of 1 Thessalonians 4:4 must be decisive in this regard. At the end of his reasoning Konradt states that the prepositional phrase μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας, not in covetous passion, does not make sense if σκεῦος is interpreted as "sexual organ" or as "body" (Konradt 2001:133). But I do not see his point.

Sometimes 1 Peter 3:7 is used as an argument in favour of this interpretation (Maurer 1964:368). It is said there that men have to live carefully with their wives as with the weaker vessel (σκεῦος). It should be noted that in this verse women are *compared* with the weaker vessel, they are not identified with it. The point of comparison is the purported frailty of both women and vessels. Moreover, from the comparative, used in 1 Peter 3:7, it could be concluded that a man can be referred to as σκεῦος as well.

If σκεῦος pointed to someone's wife, an element would be introduced that is foreign to the context. Paul discusses adultery in this passage, not how to acquire a woman. It should be noticed that the usual expression for "to acquire a woman" is γυναῖκα λαβεῖν, not γυναῖκα κτᾶσθαι; see for example Gn 4:19 (LXX); 21:21 (LXX); Mk 12:19; Lk 20:29. Moreover, these words would be addressed only to unmarried men if σκεῦος refers to a woman and κτᾶσθαι has an inchoative meaning. But, as said above, these words are addressed to the whole community, as is the whole passage.

Another question is if the definite article together with the pronoun ἑαυτοῦ can be used with regard to something that is to be obtained in the future. We would expect then an anarthrous noun and the dative ἑαυτῶ (Smith 2001a:79); cf Genesis 4:19 (LXX), ἔλαβεν ἑαυτῶ Λάμεχ δύο γυναῖκας, Lamech took unto him two wives. Besides this it is strange that Paul would prescribe that every man should take a woman as the coming of the Lord is expected shortly; cf 1 Corinthians 7:25-40 where the Corinthians are told that it is better to stay alone than to marry, apparently because of the short time they have left.

It was argued above that the verb κτᾶσθαι can have a durative meaning. In that case the phrase τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῶ καὶ

¹⁶ Konradt (2001:132): "Wenn man 4Q416 Frgm. 2 2,21 zur Interpretation von 1 Thessalonians 4, 4 heranziehen darf, stützt die Stelle eher die Deutung von σκεῦος im Sinne von Frau."

τιμῆ could be interpreted as “to live with his own wife in holiness and honour”. But apart from the objections against the interpretation of σκεῦος as “wife”, the words πορνεία (v 3) and ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας (v 5) do not seem to refer to the behaviour within marriage, but rather sexuality outside marriage. I conclude that this interpretation cannot be upheld either.

3.2.3 Σκεῦος in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 refers to the human body

The third interpretation I mentioned is that σκεῦος might refer to the “human body”. The noun σκεῦος is found elsewhere in the hardly disputed Pauline literature in Romans 9:21.22.23; 2 Corinthians 4:7. Σκεῦος can point to “vessel or implement of any kind” (Liddell & Scott 1968:1607). In Romans 9 σκεῦος can be translated as “vessel”. These verses refer to the potter who makes different objects; some of them have an honourable function, others are just for everyday use. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 σκεῦος is used for the human body as the container in which a treasure (the gospel) is saved.¹⁷ We can deduce from this last text that the use of this noun for the human body was not strange for Paul. In a comparable way someone who cleanses himself from evil things can be pointed to in 2 Timothy 2:21 as σκεῦος εἰς τιμὴν, ἡγιασμένον, a vessel for honour, a holy one. In Timothy 18 the people of Israel are compared with a vessel made by the potter. It is interesting to see that in Timothy 18:4 the Hebrew כְּלִי is translated in the Septuagint with ἀγγεῖον, whereas Aquila and Symmachus translated the same word with σκεῦος.¹⁸ In LXX Psalm 30:13; Timothy 22:28; Hosea 8:8 σκεῦος is used as translation for the Hebrew כְּלִי. In these texts these nouns point to a human being or to the people of Israel. They are as fragile as a vessel. In the *Epistle of Barnabas* 7:3; 11:9 Jesus is pointed to as τὸ σκεῦος τοῦ πνεύματος, the vessel of the Spirit, and in 21:8 the addressees are summoned to fulfil the commandments as long as τὸ καλὸν σκεῦός ἐστιν μεθ’ ὑμῶν. These last words cannot be translated literally, but the meaning is: as long as you are alive. Here σκεῦος points to the human body. In *Hermas, Mandate* 5.1.2 it is said that the Holy Spirit dwells within the body (σκεῦος) of a patient person. In *Vita Adae et Evae* 31:4 the human being is called a σκεῦος made by God himself. The use of the comparable noun ἀγγεῖον for the body as the vessel of the soul, the spirit or the feelings in several texts¹⁹ does not prove that σκεῦος has a similar meaning in 1

¹⁷ Cf Thrall (1994:320-325).

¹⁸ Ziegler (1976:239).

¹⁹ *Hermas, Mandate* 5.2.5; Philo, *Quod Deterius Potiori Insidiari Solet* 170; *De Posteritate Caini* 137; *De Migratione Abrahami* 193. 197; *De Somniis* 1.26.

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Thessalonians 4:4, but it does show that the idea that the body is a vessel was not unusual.²⁰

The examples listed above do not lead to absolute proof for any interpretation, but they clearly show that the use of σκεῦος for the human body is more usual than the interpretation of this noun as a woman. The interpretation of σκεῦος as the sexual organ is very improbable. The Qumran texts, quoted as support for the latter interpretation, are themselves ambiguous and above that it seems inconceivable that Paul would have spoken in such a way. I conclude that the interpretation of σκεῦος in this text as the human body is by far the most probable. This means that the preceding infinitive κτᾶσθαι must have a durative meaning. Rightly Smith writes that this interpretation “best accounts for the lexical and grammatical details of the paragraph” (Smith 2001a:103).²¹ Consequently, in my opinion the phrase τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι should be interpreted as “to possess”, i.e., to have under control his own body.

3.3 1 Thessalonians 4:5

The prepositional clause ἐν ἀγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ, μὴ ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας, in holiness and in honour, not in covetous passion, formulates in a positive and a negative way the manner the Thessalonians should behave with respect to their bodies. The behaviour of the Thessalonians should be dominated by holiness and dignity and not by covetous passion. The first positive phrase can be combined with any of the interpretations of εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι. This is much more difficult for the second, negative, part of this clause. Ἐπιθυμία means “desire”, “longing”. This noun can be used both in a positive and a negative way; see Philippians 1:23 and Romans 1:24 respectively. The noun πάθος is used only twice elsewhere in the New Testament, Romans 1:26 and Colossians 3:5. It has a negative connotation in these texts. Combined with ἐπιθυμία the noun πάθος refers to unbridled sexual desire, which is unacceptable. In my opinion these words make it very difficult to interpret τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος as one’s own woman. The words ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας rather refer to sexual behaviour outside marriage than to a man’s attitude towards his own wife. Here in 1 Thessalonians 4:5 covetous passion is said to belong to the pagans who do not know God. In these last

²⁰ Authors such as Galanis (1985:244-245); Smith (2001a:91-95) make too rashly use of texts with the word ἀγγεῖον.

²¹ It is really confusing that Smith after this conclusion says on the same page that σκεῦος “may be explained by Paul’s: Choosing to use a euphemism to describe self-control in the sexual realm.”

non-restrictive words it is implied that all the pagans do not know God.²² This verse must be interpreted as a rhetorical exaggeration in order to describe as clearly as possible the different attitudes of Christians and pagans. Paul argues here that the Christians live according to a higher standard than the pagans (cf Romans 1:24-32). But even so he asked the Christians time and again to aim at perfection, at a life according to the word of God.

3.4 1 Thessalonians 4:6

In verse 6 Paul continues his exhortation with the words τὸ μὴ ὑπερβαίνειν καὶ πλεονεκτεῖν ἐν τῷ πράγματι τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ, not to pass over his brother and put him at a disadvantage in this matter. The article τὸ makes clear that these infinitives are not dependent on the infinitive εἰδέναι (vs 4), but should be connected with ὁ ἁγιασμός ὑμῶν in vs 3 (Légasse 1999:208; Holtz 1986:155-156). The meaning of these infinitives and of the prepositional clause ἐν τῷ πράγματι is frequently discussed. The verb ὑπερβαίνειν means “to step over”, “to transgress”, and also “to sin” (Liddell & Scott 1968:1860). It can have a personal object, in which case it means “to overtake”, “to pass” (LXX 2 Kings 18:23) or “to neglect”, “to disregard” (Plutarch, *De Amore Proliis* 496d). The verb πλεονεκτεῖν could be translated as “to get the advantage over”, “to overreach” or “to defraud” (Liddell & Scott 1968:1416); see also 2 Corinthians 7:2. In this context it is not immediately clear what Paul wants to forbid. Both verbs must point to misbehaviour against the brother. But which kind of misbehaviour is meant? The verbs that are used could point to exorbitant profit at the expense of others. In that case the attitude in business matters would be referred to. But it is possible that these words are used in a metaphorical sense to mean “to cause someone harm”. In that case Paul would continue to discuss misbehaviour with respect to sexuality. This is all the more probable as in verse 7 the reasoning ends with the word ἁγιασμός, a word that was used in the verses 3 and 4. The prepositional clause ἐν τῷ πράγματι should give a definite answer, but these words are not very clear and have the meaning “in the case” or “in this case”.²³ To my knowledge a plural is always used if “business” is meant. If the meaning of “business” can be excluded, which I believe, we can conclude that these words must be connected with the verses 3-5 and that the same topic is at stake in this long sentence: misbehaviour with respect to sexuality (Rigaux 1956:510; Best

²² The same problem of a restrictive or non-restrictive meaning of some words is found in 1 Thessalonians 2:15, the Jews τῶν καὶ τὸν κύριον ἀποκτείναντων (cf Verhoef 1995:41-46). See also Galatians 4:8.

²³ Hugo Grotius tried to escape this problem by conjecturing ἐν τινι πράγματι (see Hugo Grotius 1755:705).

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1972:166; Légasse 1999:223-224). The article τῷ has an anaphoric sense here: in this matter.²⁴

In the second half of verse 6 it is said that God will punish the offenders of these precepts. These words emphasize the significance of the issue. Paul urges the Thessalonians to listen carefully and to obey these sentences. If they obey and live a holy life they will take part in the future with the Lord (4:13-18). Finally Paul reminds them that he spoke about all these things before. He confirms what they know already.

3. 1 Thessalonians 4:7

Verse 7 forms a perfect match with the verses 3-6. The preceding words are motivated by the statement that people are not called by God because of their former impurity (ἐπὶ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ)²⁵ but in order to live in holiness (ἐν ἁγιασμῷ). For καλεῖν ἐν we have a nice parallel in 1 Corinthians 7:15 where it is said: ἐν δὲ εἰρήνῃ κέκληκεν ὑμᾶς ὁ θεός, God has called you to live in peace.²⁶ It should be noticed that Paul uses here in 1 Thessalonians 4:7 the pronoun ἡμᾶς (us) while in verse 3 the pronoun ὑμᾶς (you) was used. He speaks more generally here and he includes himself. The noun ἀκαθαρσία, impurity, is often used with respect to sexuality; see Romans 1:24; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3. ἁγιασμός was used twice in the verses 3 and 4. It is circumscribed in verse 3 as “to abstain from fornication”. These concluding words confirm that one specific topic is discussed in the whole preceding paragraph: they should have control over their bodies in a holy and honourable way, not led by covetous passion.

3.6 1 Thessalonians 4:8

In verse 8 this pericope is concluded with the general warning that people who reject these commandments reject God. Galanis argued that Paul refers to members of the Christian community in Thessaloniki (Galanis 1985:255). But this is not at all clear. On the contrary, if Paul knew of a real evil in this community, he would have spoken in a different way. The statement in verse 8 underlines the seriousness of vs 7; cf Luke 10:16. They should not reject God who gives his Holy Spirit. This last clause reminds of Ezekiel 37:14 (LXX) where it is said: δώσω πνεῦμα μου εἰς ὑμᾶς, I will give my Spirit in you. The effect of this gift of the Spirit is that the people will live. In a comparable way

²⁴ Cf Turner (1963:172-174) and see the use of τῷ πράγματι in 2 Corinthians 7:11.

²⁵ For the use of the preposition ἐπί see Von Dobschütz (1909:170-171).

²⁶ Cf Conzelmann (1981:156): “rufen, um in Frieden zu sein.”

Paul speaks of God “who empowers them to live lives of purity by the giving of the Spirit” (Richard 1995:206).

4. THE FUNCTION OF 1 THESSALONIANS 4:1-8

What is the function of this pericope? This paragraph does not have a real parallel in the epistle to nearby Philippi. Did Paul have a weighty reason for writing down these words, a reason that did not exist in Philippi? Or do we strain these verses with these questions?

First of all we have to decide if this pericope is really written with regard to a specific situation in Thessaloniki. In some commentaries it is argued that this pericope points to sexual excesses in the Christian community (Green 2002:187). In other commentaries these sentences are explained as general statements in force for all people for all times, as for example Romans 15:13; Philippians 4:8-9. In my opinion we should explain these verses as sentences written to the community of the Thessalonians. It is not accidental that these words form a part of *this* letter and not of the epistle to the Philippians or the Galatians. On the other hand, the words λοιπὸν οὖν in 4:1 and the calm wording in the whole pericope show that it is not a hot item. When Paul blames people because of their misbehaviour the tone is very different and even emotional; see 1 Corinth 5. It is clear that Paul felt compelled to write so sharply there because of real abuses in Corinthians. I state that 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 indeed refers to the specific situation in Thessaloniki. Nevertheless, Paul had no reason to bring charges against them (Collins 1984:327).²⁷ The exhortations in this chapter should be read against the background of a seaport town where prostitution is found more often than in small villages. Frequently it was connected with orgiastic cults as that of Dionysus or that of Kabeiros. Paul wants to warn the Thessalonians against fornication and impurity. The recent excavation of a large bathhouse at the South-East corner of the *agora* may be illustrative for Paul’s warnings, as diverse activities including “erotic adventures” took place there (Adam-Veleni 2003:141). Because of these specific circumstances Paul added these admonitions in consideration of excesses that might occur.

It was said above that the vocabulary attracts attention. The noun ἁγιασμός is used three times.²⁸ Christoph vom Brocke argued that Paul

²⁷ Cf Nicholl (2004:102): “it is probable that Paul raised the issue of holiness because of the missionaries’ anxiety rather than because of a specific concern of the community”.

²⁸ The verbs ὑπερβαίνειν and πλεονεκτεῖν must also be mentioned. Ὑπερβαίνειν is a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament and πλεονεκτεῖν is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in 2 Corinthians 2:11; 7:2; 12:17-18.

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“again and again” speaks about the sanctification of life (Vom Brocke 2001:121). He asked if ἁγιασμός must be interpreted against the background of the cult of Kabeiros.²⁹ Vom Brocke refers to a third century inscription that mentions this god as Thessaloniki’s ἀγιώτατος πάτριος θεός (see Edson 1972:83-84). It is known that Kabeiros had been depicted on local coins since the time of Vespasianus (Touratsoglou 1988:86-87, 325-337).³⁰ This makes it probable that Kabeiros was worshipped some decades earlier. But we do not have any evidence that the noun ἁγιασμός in 1 Thessalonians 4 was used to refer to Kabeiros. The occurrence of ἀγιώτατος for Kabeiros in a third century inscription cannot be used to explain the phrases written by Paul two centuries earlier. The noun ἁγιασμός, sanctification or sanctity, is not rare. It is used 10 times in the New Testament: Romans 6:19.22; 1 Corinthians 1:30; 1 Thessalonians 4:3.4.7; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:2.³¹ Such a distribution is not exceptional. The noun ἄκαθαρσία, impurity, also occurs ten times in the New Testament, of which six times in the Paulines (e.g. 1 Th 2:3; 4:7). There are other examples of a similar distribution of a particular word. Consequently we do not need to look for new theories to explain the occurrence of the word ἁγιασμός. In my opinion the wording in this pericope is very well understandable against the background of this big city. Paul wants the Thessalonians to be prepared for the coming of the Lord and in his instructions he adjusts himself to the local circumstances.

5. CONCLUSION

I started with the observation that this pericope gives some exegetical problems. For the explanation of 1 Thessalonians 4:4 even texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls are used though it is very doubtful if these documents are helpful in this regard. In my opinion it is not necessary to go that far. With the help of other Greek texts the meaning of εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκέυος κτᾶσθαι, can be explained. The Thessalonians will have understood these words. The same is true for the prepositional clause ἐν τῷ πράγματι, in this matter. This pericope is one coherent paragraph in which it is emphasized that the Thessalonians should live a holy life in order to receive salvation at

²⁹ Earlier Witt (1985:975-976) asked the same question. For the cult of Kabeiros cf Hemberg 1950; Vitti (1996:91-92).

³⁰ Wrongly Green (2002:44) states that the Kabeiros begins to appear on the coinage of the city during the second century.

³¹ The related noun ἁγιασούνη is found three times in the New Testament, Romans 1:4; 2 Corinthians 7:1 and 1 Thessalonians 3:13. The noun ἀγιότης is a hapax legomenon (Heb 12:10).

the parousia of the Lord. Paul started this pericope with λοιπὸν οὖν, furthermore then. These words connect this paragraph with the preceding one, where the parousia is mentioned and they mark that Paul is going to discuss something new. In this new paragraph he makes clear that he wants the Thessalonians to live in such a way that they will be beyond reproach at the parousia. After this pericope and after still another paragraph in 4:9-12 Paul starts to discuss the items the Thessalonians presented to him and then he goes into a full consideration of the parousia.

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