

To Possess One's Vessel: 1 Thessalonians 4:4

by René A. Lopez

Introduction

Many recent articles have sought to define *each of you should know how to possess his own vessel* (1 Thessalonians 4:4).¹ The major difficulties, according to Jay E. Smith, are: “(1) the referent of σκεῦος [vessel], and (2) the meaning of the verb κτάομαι [possess].”² The following chart shows that a wide range of answers to these two issues exists.

View:	κτάομαι	σκεῦος
1. acquire a virgin partner	acquire	virgin partner
2a. acquire a wife	acquire	wife
2b. live with a wife	live with	wife
3a. control his genitals	gain control	man's own genitals
3b. control his/her private parts	gain control	person's own private parts
4a. control his own body	gain control	man's own body
4b. control his/her own body	gain control	man's/woman's own body

The definition of *vessel* is the primary subject of debate. The *virgin partner* view and both versions of the *wife* view see this as a command to men, but define *his vessel* as a person, a woman. The final views regard the command as addressing men [or men and women], with *vessel* meaning either the person's own private parts or own body.

The secondary debate concerns κτάομαι. Those arguing that σκεῦος (*vessel*) refers to another person (views 1–2) define the verb

¹ Jay E. Smith, “1 Thessalonians 4:4: Breaking the Impasse,” *BBR* 11, no. 1 (2001): 65-105; Jay E. Smith, “Another Look at 4Q416 2 ii. 21, a Critical Parallel to First Thessalonians 4:4,” *CBQ* 63 (July 2001): 499-504. Raymond F. Collins, “The Function of Paranaesis in 1 Thess 4:1-12; 5:12-22,” *ETL* 74 (December 1998): 398-410. Torleif Elgvin, “‘To Master His Own Vessel:’ 1 Thess 4:4 in Light of New Qumran Evidence,” *NTS* 43 (October 1997): 604-19. John Strugnell, “More on Wives and Marriage in the Dead Sea Scrolls: (4Q416 2 ii 21 [Cf. 1 Thess 4:4] and 4QMMT § B),” *RevQ* 17 (December 1996): 537-47. D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture NIV Text, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 33 ([Nashville]: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 122-29. Michael McGehee, “A Rejoinder to Two Recent Studies Dealing with 1 Thess 4:4,” *CBQ* 51 (January 1989): 82-89.

² Smith, “Impasse,” 65.

κτάομαι as *acquire* or *remain married*. Views that regard σκεῦος as *genitalia* or *one's own body* render κτάομαι as *acquire control of*.

Paul's thematic statement (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10) is integral to any satisfactory solution to the debate. Unfortunately, the literature has largely ignored it.

Theme and Structure of the Epistle

E. D. Hirsch sets forth the heart of hermeneutics: “The whole can be understood only through its parts, but the parts can be understood only through the whole.”³ Therefore, the view that best matches the theme and structure of the epistle is preferable.

The prologue (1:2–10) expresses gratitude for the recipients' progress. Verses 9–10 thematically summarize the three components of Paul's argument:⁴

[1] *For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols [2] to serve the living and true God, and [3] to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*

Zane Hodges says, “Recent studies of ancient literature, as well as of the writings of the rhetoricians of the Greco-Roman period, have revealed that accomplished communicators of this era normally worked from an outline.”⁵ Accordingly, these verses summarize the book's argument.⁶

³ E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 76. Unfortunately, many interpreters have neglected the impact of the epistle's theme and structure upon 1 Thess 4:4.

⁴ George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, *Studies in Religion*, ed. Charles H. Long (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 78-79. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament*, ABRL, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 416-17. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Nelson, 1982).

⁵ Zane C. Hodges, “1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and the Rapture,” *CTS Journal* 6 (October-December 2000): 23.

⁶ *Ibid.* notes, “The prologue's conclusion, 1:9b–10, skillfully anticipates all three divisions of the body (2:1–5:11).” However, this writer extends the

*The Structural Outline of the Epistle*⁷

Theme Passage	Development
<i>What manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols</i>	2:1–3:13
<i>To serve the living and true God</i>	4:1–12
<i>And to wait for His Son from heaven</i>	4:13–5:11

The following structural outline applies vv. 9–10 to the body of the epistle.

1. Greetings (1:1)
2. Prologue: Gratitude for God’s work in the readers (1:2–10)
3. Body: The readers should stay the course (2:1–5:11)
 - A. They should trust Paul, because they trust God (2:1–3:13)
 - B. They should serve God in holiness & brotherly love (4:1–12)
 - C. They should hope in deliverance via the rapture (4:13–5:11)
4. Epilogue: Final admonitions and exhortations (5:12–22)
5. Farewell (5:23–28)

The Center of the Epistle’s Body 4:1–12

The theme verses have a structure, which points readers to the center of the letter: *To serve the living and true God*. Three distinct but related topics comprise the call to service in 4:1–12:

1. *servicing* by being sexually pure, 4:1–8
2. *servicing* by treating believers in love, 4:9–10
3. *servicing* by working, rather than meddling, 4:11–12

The eschatological section (4:13–5:11) adds a fourth topic concerning the deficiencies in their understanding of what they had been

theme verses to v. 9a, since it introduces Paul’s character defense (fully developed in 2:1–3:13). Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 32b (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 118, views the vindication of Paul’s character (2:1–12) as an expansion of 1:9.

⁷ The structural outline draws upon Hodges, “Rapture,” 24. Merrill C. Tenney, “First Epistle to the Thessalonians,” in *ISBE*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley, vol. 4. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 832, and Brown, *NT*, 457, propose similar outlines of the book’s structure.

taught before (3:10). Several verses show that this is not new content (4:1–2, 6, 9, 11; 5:1–2).⁸

The center of the epistle's body, 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12, links to 1:9–10. The moral exhortations of 4:1–12 surrounding *to possess his own vessel* (4:4) bear heavily on the exegesis. That is, if Paul sought to introduce a more specific topic, like *acquiring a virgin-partner* or *a wife*, why was he so vague in doing this?

The theme statement in 1:9c urges both men and women *to serve the living and true God*. In that light, why would 4:3–8 only urge male Thessalonians to sexual purity? Karl P. Donfried, as well as others,⁹ correctly makes this connection:

[*Dionysianic*] sexual symbols . . . were not mere representations of the hope of joyous afterlife; they were also sensually provocative. The fact that the god Dionysus was the god of wine and joy often gave allowance for a strong emphasis on noisy revelry of all sorts. Already in an anticipatory way we might ask whether this emphasis on the phallus and sensuality offer a possible background for the exhortations in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–8 *in general and for the difficult problem of the σκεῦος in particular*.¹⁰

This presents a problem for the *virgin-partner* and the *wife* views but favors the *body* and *sexual organ* views.

Analysis of Views

The most concise way to examine every position is to group views according to their approaches to σκεῦος. Paul commands certain

⁸ Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 133. Cf. O. Larry Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles: Marriage Rules in the Letters of Paul*, SBLD 80, ed. Charles Talbert (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985).

⁹ Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millenarian Piety*, ed. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 108, 126–32, sees verses 3–8 as addressing moral laxity resulting from widespread acceptance of Gnosticism or the Cabiri cult (ibid., 126–32). Cf. Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles*, 66; Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 123–24.

¹⁰ Karl P. Donfried, “The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *NTS* 31 (July 1985): 337 (italics added).

people about their own vessel. *One's own vessel* can be understood as one of the following:

1. Someone else, e.g., a woman
2. His [her] own private parts
3. His [her] own body in sexual matters

Views that See the Vessel as Someone Else

View 1: Acquire a Virgin Partner

Jouette M. Bassler has promoted a new view which interprets *possess his own vessel* as “acquire a virgin partner.”¹¹

Arguments for this View

One of BDAG’s three basic categories for σκεῦος is “a human being exercising a function, *instrument, vessel* fig. ext. of 1 or 2.”¹²

Bassler views the term σκεῦος (not defined in the letter) as the main problem.¹³ Her main arguments follow.

¹¹ Jouette M. Bassler, “σκεῦος: A Modest Proposal for Illuminating Paul’s Use of Metaphor in 1 Thessalonians 4:4,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress), 53, 61-65.

¹² Walter Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 927 (italics in original). For the OT, Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907), 478–80, has three basic categories for the 325 uses of כֵּל: “(1) article, utensil, vessel, . . . (2) implement, apparatus, . . . (3) vessel, receptacle.”

¹³ Bassler, “Proposal,” 53–66. Roger L. Omanson, “Translations: Text and Interpretation,” *EvQ* 57 (July 1985): 198, notes, “In English the word *vessel* refers to (a) a utensil for holding something, (b) a ship, or (c) a tube or duct of the body such as a vein. But in Greek of the New Testament period, σκεῦος, has the following range of meanings: (a) literally, an object used for any purpose at all such as household utensils, farming implements, military equipment, baggage, and gear of ships; and (b) figuratively, the human body, the penis, a wife. It is immediately clear that the semantic range of English word ‘vessel’ is not entirely coterminous with the Greek word σκεῦος . . .

Parallels. 1 Thessalonians 4:4 is a closer parallel to 1 Corinthians 7:37 than to 1 Corinthians 7:2:

1 Thessalonians 4:4 τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι

1 Corinthians 7:37 τηρεῖν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ παρθένον

1 Thessalonians 4:4 τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι

1 Corinthians 7:2 ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἔχειτω

1 Thessalonians 4:4 and 1 Corinthians 7:2 refer to very different ideas. Acquiring a “vessel” differs from having sexual relations with one’s wife.¹⁴ The “correspondence in content was more apparent than real.”¹⁵

Σκεῦος and παρθένος seem analogous. That is, “If σκεῦος [“vessel”] and παρθένος [“virgin”] refer to the same relationship, one text refers to inaugurating (1 Thess 4:4), the other to maintaining (1 Cor 7:37), this relationship.”¹⁶

Syntax and exegetical significance. Both passages have similar themes. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 and 4:1 refer to pleasing God. 1 Corinthians 7:32 argues that only the *unmarried* can please the Lord. Despite using different terms for “the unmarried woman and the virgin” (ἡ γυνὴ ἢ ἄγαμος καὶ ἡ παρθένος),¹⁷ both are *to be holy in*

Interpreters are in agreement that Paul’s use of σκεῦος in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 has a metaphorical or figurative meaning. But notice that the word ‘vessel’ in contemporary English does not denote any of these figurative meanings which existed in Greek. Therefore, a literal translation is not really a translation if the *sense* of the original must be retained.” Italics original.

¹⁴ Bassler, “Proposal,” 61.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ The καὶ may be copulative (referring to two distinct individuals) or epexegetical (referring to the same person). See Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Women

body and in spirit (7:34). Holiness is the thrust of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8, so Bassler asserts that “pleasing God is facilitated by a celibate life-style.”¹⁸

Furthermore, the three infinitives—*to abstain* (ἀπέχεσθαι), *to know* (εἰδέναι), and *to acquire* (κτᾶσθαι)¹⁹—define the *will of God* (ἐστὶν θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ, v. 3) in 1 Thessalonians 4:3–6. One infinitive, *to know* (εἰδέναι), is crucial to Bassler’s view. She notes that Philippians 4:12 is Paul’s only other use of this construction. There, three finite verbs—οἶδα ... οἶδα ... μεμύημαι—develop the same concept of knowing, or learning the *secret* (μεμύημαι) of being content in all circumstances. Bassler argues that 1 Thessalonians 4:4 urges knowing *the secret* or *advantages* of acquiring a vessel in sanctification and honor.²⁰

Finally, the phrase *transgress and defraud his brother in the matter* could refer to the virgin/celibate partner within the marriage.²¹ Defaulting after entering into such a relationship (1 Corinthians 7:36–38), wrongs the virgin and her relatives, who initially agreed to this special relationship. Thus, this view suggests that Paul is saying, “Each of you learn the secret about acquiring a vessel/virgin-partner in holiness and honor, in order not to defraud everyone that agreed on such a relationship.”

Arguments against This View

Counterarguments are numerous. The following critique is sufficient (but not exhaustive).

Parallel Passages. Bassler admits that basing the problematic 1 Thessalonians 4:4 on the equally problematic 1 Corinthians 7:36–38 is “risky business.”²² Furthermore, no clear parallels even hint at such a virgin-partner view.

Holy in Body and Spirit: The Social Setting of 1 Corinthians 7,” *NTS* 36 (April 1990): 171.

¹⁸ Bassler, “Proposal,” 61–62.

¹⁹ *BDAG*, 572.

²⁰ Bassler, “Proposal,” 63–64 (italics added).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²² *Ibid.*, 66.

Syntax and Exegetical Significance. Contextually, 1 Corinthians 7 argues against Bassler's view.²³ Paul urges those unable to control passions to marry (7:2).²⁴ The only time for marriage partners to abstain from fulfilling normal marital-sexual functions is when they *devote themselves for a time . . . to prayer* (7:5), *lest Satan tempt [them] because of [their] lack of self-control*. If marriage prevents πορνεία, then how can 7:36–38 teach virgin-partner marriages? This would also contradict the command not to deprive one another (μὴ ἀποστερεῖτε ἀλλήλους) of sexual relationship.

No conceptual or verbal parallels validate this use of σκεῦος. Its basis is purely conjectural. Finally, not only has this view found few supporters,²⁵ it has received much criticism.²⁶ The view has a purely hypothetical exegetical basis, because it lacks not only conceptual or verbal parallels but also contextual support and therefore should be rejected.

View 2: Acquire or Live with a Wife

²³ Elgvin, "Qumran," 616, says, "In 1 Cor 7 Paul possibly relates to such relations, but he does not promote them. His advice is to live celibate as he did himself, or to marry and live sexually with one's spouse. The admonition in 1 Thess 4:3 to abstain from πορνεία is a prohibition which presupposes marriage as the standard family institution, as πορνεία means all sexual intercourse other than that which takes place within the marriage relationship."

²⁴ Ibid., Elgvin says, "1 Cor 7:1–9 shows that Paul was not naive about the strength of sexual passions."

²⁵ See H. Aechelis, *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII. Kapitel des I Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902), and John Coolidge Hurd, *The Origin of I Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 1965; repr., Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

²⁶ Smith, "Impasse," 66 n. 1, says, "[This] interpretation lacks clear terminological parallels and is based upon evidence that is quite general and capable of a number of different interpretations." Elgvin, "Qumran," 615–16, also says, "This proposal is highly hypothetical. . . . Pauline corpus does not reveal more clear evidence of such teaching than the enigmatic σκεῦος in 1 Thess 4. . . . And further, Paul would have been immensely naive about sexual desire if he as a rule had advised young people to enter celibate relationships with persons of the opposite sex." Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: the Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 40–7, 205–10, recently critiqued Bassler.

The meanings “to acquire a wife” and “to live with a wife”²⁷ have been popular through the centuries. Both views treat σκεῦος as *wife*. They part company on κτᾶσθαι, because one group understands it as *acquire* or *obtain*,²⁸ while the other regards it as *possess*, *keep*, or *control*.²⁹ Does *getting married* (or *staying married*) fulfill the command?

Arguments for this Approach

Extrabiblical Evidence. Many early writers interpreted σκεῦος as “wife.”³⁰ It has remained a popular view.

Furthermore, Rabbinic literature also interprets σκεῦος as *wife*. *M. Ket.* 3:4–5 uses *vessel* for a man’s wife, as does *B. Meg.* 12b:

Some said, The Median women were the most beautiful, and others said, The Persian women are the most beautiful. Then said Ahasuerus to them: The vessel that I use [כֶּלִי שֶׁאֲנִי יֹשֵׁר] is neither Median nor Persian, but Chaldean. Do you wish to see her? They said to him: Yes, but only if she is naked.

Smith, as others,³¹ attests to rabbinic usage. Raymond Collins states, “Similar uses of *keli* in the sense of woman, and always with

²⁷ NAB², NIV^{mg}, RSV support the former; TEV, CEV, NIV^{mg}, favor the latter:

²⁸ Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles*, 69–76, interprets τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι as “let each man know how to obtain his own wife.”

²⁹ Raymond F. Collins, “This is the Will of God: Your Sanctification.” (1 Thess 4:3),” in *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians*, BETL 66 (Leuven: University Press, 1984), 313–14, interprets τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι as “each one of you know how to live with his own wife.”

³⁰ Christian Maurer, “σκεῦος,” in *TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 365 n. 49. For a survey of patristic views on this issue, see S. K. Avotri, “Possessing One’s Vessel in 1 Thessalonians 4:4: Marital or Martial Metaphor” (Ph.D. diss., The Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 1991), 16–31; M. Adinolfi, “La Santità del Matrimonio in 1 Tess. 4:1–8,” *RivB* 24 (1976): 168–71; Smith, “Impasse,” 65; Collins, “Will of God,” 311–12.

³¹ Smith, “Impasse,” 68 n. 12, says, “About 270 of the approximately 320 occurrences of כֶּלִי found in the MT are translated σκεῦος in the LXX.” He also notes a number of parallels: “*Midr. Esth.* 3:13 [on 1:11]. The other key text is *b. Mes.* 84b; (and parallels *Midr. Qoh.* 11.2; *b. Sanh.* 22b; *y. Sabb.* 10.5; *Psiq. Rab Kah.* 11.24), where, in reply to a marriage proposal from Judah the

sexual overtones, can be found in the Talmudic tractates Pesikta (98b), Sanhedrin (22b), and Taanith (20ab).³²

The Dead Sea Scrolls (henceforth DSS) also present evidence for $\sigma\kappa\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\varsigma$ meaning wife in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 in Sapiential Work A (henceforth SW A).³³ Now based on this new discovery of SW A document 4Q416 2 ii 21, interpreting $\sigma\kappa\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\varsigma$ as "wife" may well be the correct view according to how one understands the following piece of evidence.

SW A 4Q416 2 ii 21 reads: $\text{וְגַם אֵל תְּקַל כְּלִי חִיקְבָּה}$ ³⁴ = "Furthermore,³⁵ do not dishonor the vessel of your bosom."³⁶

First, $\text{אָרוּר מִקְּלָה אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ}$ "in *Deut* 27:16 is the opposite command to honour (כבד) father and mother in *Exodus* 20. In col. iv. infra, one will see how 4Q416 tries to extend the fourth (or fifth) com-

Prince, the widow of Rabbi Eleazar b. Simeon retorts, 'Should the vessel which has been used by a holy man be used by a secular one [שתמש בו חול] 'שנשתמש בו קודש'?" See also Maurer, " $\sigma\kappa\epsilon\upsilon\omicron\varsigma$," 359–62.

³² Collins, "Will of God," 41.

³³ Elgvin, "Qumran," 604. Seven fragmentary copies exist: Cave 1 (1Q26) and Cave 4 (4Q415/416/417/418a/418b/423).

³⁴ The scribe did not distinguish *waw* from *yod*. Therefore, כְּלִי חִיקְבָּה ("woman/wife of thy bosom") could actually be כְּלִי חוֹקְבָּה , which would mean "thy lawful wife." However, as Strugnell, "Wives," 538, believes, "One should compare the equally ambiguous phrase in [4Q416] . . . col. iv, line 5 infra, where, however, there is a synonymous phrase in *Deuteronomy* 13:7 חִיקְבָּה אִשָּׁה —this may lead one to favor כְּלִי חִיקְבָּה over כְּלִי חוֹקְבָּה here too. . . . Our choice of חִיקְבָּה is perhaps hesitant, but that one could read חוֹקְבָּה in col. ii and חִיקְבָּה in col. iv is unlikely." Elgvin, "Qumran," 606, concurs and adds, "This reading [כְּלִי חוֹקְבָּה , 'your lawful vessel'] is less probable. כְּלִי חוֹקְבָּה has no biblical precedent, and its meaning would be enigmatic. The reading כְּלִי חִיקְבָּה is preferable, a reading which has some kind of sexual connotation: תיק 'bosom' appears having sexual connotations in Gen 16:5; Deut 13:7, 28:54, 56; 2 Sam 12:8; 1 Kgs 1:2; Micah 7:5; Proverbs 5:20; 6:27."

³⁵ "The word translated *furthermore* (וגם), introduces a sub-unit within a larger section," as in several Qumran texts. See Elgvin, "Qumran," 606 n. 9.

³⁶ Ibid., 606, is the source of this translation.

mandment's sphere from one's father and mother to one's wife—and so here also.”³⁷ Strugnell reasons, “One would then expect ל תקל as it did with parents, also with wives to cover here all matters relating to כבד command, and not just sexual abuse of wives or contempt for them.”³⁸ Second, since 4Q416 2 ii 21 shows that the term בל, just like τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος, could mean “his own wife” or “his own woman,” interpreting *vessel* as “wife” in 1 Thessalonians 4:4 becomes more convincing. Third, the phrase ל תקל in 4Q416 2 ii 21 resembles κτᾶσθαι ἐν ... καὶ τιμῇ in 1 Thessalonians 4:4b.³⁹

Parallel Passages. Conceptual parallels for *vessel* (בל) as “wife” appear in Proverbs 5:15–18:⁴⁰

15 Drink water from your own cistern (MT, בר = LXX, ἀγγεῖον⁴¹)

and running water from your own well (MT, באר = LXX, φρεάτων πηγῆς)

16 Should your fountains (MT, פְּעֻמֹת = LXX, τὰ ὕδατα ἐκ τῆς σῆς πηγῆς) be dispersed abroad?

17 Let them be only your own, and not for strangers with you.

18 Let your fountain (MT, מקור = LXX, ἡ πηγὴ σου τοῦ ὕδατος) be blessed, and rejoice with the wife of your youth.

In 1 Corinthians 7:2, even though *vessel* is not used, as shown above in view one, there exists a conceptual parallel between τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἐχέτω and τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι.⁴² Not only

³⁷ Strugnell, “Wives,” 539.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 540.

⁴⁰ The format derives from Smith, “Impasse,” 68. He notes other conceptual parallels for σκεῦος as “wife”: Sirach 26:12; Canticles 4:12, 15; Prov. 3:27. Smith also sees Clement of Alexandria as referring to Eve as the receptacle of Adam’s seed (*Paed.* 3.3.19.1) and notes that Pseudo-Lucian has similar usage (*Amores* 19; fourth century CE), *ibid.*, 68 n. 11.

⁴¹ The LXX uses ἀγγεῖον (often translated *vessel*) twenty-four times.

⁴² The use of the normal present κτᾶσθαι (“to acquire”) coupled with the phrase γυναῖκα κτᾶσθαι is a well-known expression in Ruth 4:5, 10; Sir

do conceptual parallels equate *wife* with “vessel,”⁴³ but a direct verbal parallel exists as well.

The verbal parallel in 1 Peter 3:7 is striking, since it refers to a man’s wife as his “vessel” (σκεῦος).⁴⁴

Syntax and Exegetical Significance. Contextually, 1 Thessalonians 4:3b–4 warns against πορνεία in having or acquiring a wife, as in 1 Corinthians 7:1b–2:

- 1 Thessalonians 4:3b, ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας
- 1 Corinthians 7:1b–2a, καλὸν ἀνθρώπῳ γυναικὸς μὴ ἄπτεσθαι· διὰ δὲ τὰς πορνείας
- 1 Thessalonians 4:4, εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι
- 1 Corinthians 7:2b, ἕκαστος τὴν ἑαυτοῦ γυναῖκα ἔχέτω καὶ ἑκάστη τὸν ἴδιον ἄνδρα ἔχέτω.

The contextual and verbal parallels are striking. Context is an important clue to the meaning of “vessel” in 1 Thessalonians 4:4.⁴⁵

The infinitive κτᾶσθαι (“to acquire”) in 4:4 depends on the infinitive εἰδέναι (“to know”). That is, the absence of connective parti-

36:24 [29]; Ps.-Menander *Monostichoi* 398–99; Xenophon *Symp.* 2.10. See Smith, “Impasse,” 69 and 69 n. 17.

⁴³ Bassler, “Proposal,” 55 n. 12, also claims many OT conceptual parallels, even if כֶּלֶב or σκεῦος do not appear.

⁴⁴ Smith, “Impasse,” 67 n. 8, provides further evidence where the term σκεῦος refers to a wife as a “mere chattel” (Chariton *Chaer.* 1.14.9; cf. 1.12.9; 2.1.5; 3:1.6), and in another place where the marriage relationship is compared to a household σκεῦος (Plutarch *Mor.* 138E). Cf. *BDAG*, 572.

⁴⁵ Collins, “Will of God,” 313, makes this connection: “Taken in this sense [i.e., each living in a sexually active way with his own wife], v. 4 reflects a Pauline thought which the apostle later developed in response to an inquiry coming from the Corinthian community (1 Cor 7:1–7). There Paul would urge marriage and underscore the importance of sexual relationships within the marital context. There, too, Paul would reflect on the danger of πορνεία (1 Cor 7:2). In sum, it would seem that 1 Thess 4:4 is not without significant parallel in the Pauline correspondence, but that the pertinent parallel is not 1 Cor 6:12–20. Rather it is 1 Cor 7:1–7.”

cles in 4:3–6 makes κτᾶσθαι depend on εἰδέναι. Εἰδέναι (when followed by another infinitive) means “know how to.”⁴⁶ This would then translate εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῶ καὶ τιμῇ as “each one of you *know how* to live with the wife in holiness and honor.”⁴⁷

The usual⁴⁸ ingressive meaning of κτᾶσθαι would yield “to gain possession of, *procure for oneself, acquire, get.*”⁴⁹ BDAG interprets κτᾶσθαι as “take.”⁵⁰ Also, Zerwick and Grosvenor render it as “acquire.”⁵¹ Thus, to avoid the difficulties of translating τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι as “to acquire one’s own body,” Collins suggests taking κτᾶσθαι γυναῖκα as “to acquire a woman,” because it was a common expression.⁵² It corresponds to the Hebrew idiom בָּעַל אִשָּׁה. This expression can refer either to getting married (Deuteronomy 22:13; 24:1; Ruth 4:5) or to engaging in sexual relations (Isaiah 54:1). Collins infers: “If indeed *ktasthai skeuos* is the metaphorical equivalent of *ba’al isah*, 1 Thess 4:4 can easily be understood as conveying

⁴⁶ Ibid., 314; Fritz Rienecker and Cleon L. Rogers Jr., *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Cleon L. Rogers Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 597. *BDAG*, 694, s.v. οἶδα, renders 1 Thess. 4:4 as “*each one of you know how to possess his own vessel*” (italics original).

⁴⁷ Collins, “Will of God,” 314 (italics added). Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 51, has a different nuance here: “That the marriage is to be entered ‘in holiness and honor.’”

⁴⁸ Bassler, “Proposal,” 54, says, “The usual meaning of κτᾶσθαι is possible here, and the resultant translation (‘that each of you know how to acquire his own wife in holiness and honor’)”

⁴⁹ *BDAG*, 572 (italics original).

⁵⁰ Ibid. See also Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, comps., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. and aug. by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie, 9th ed. With a Revised Supplement 1996, ed. P. G. W. Glare and A. A. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 1001, which defines it as “*procure for oneself, get, acquire*” (italics original).

⁵¹ Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, trans. Mary Grosvenor, 4th ed. (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1993), 618.

⁵² Collins, “Will of God,” 313. See Sirach 36:24; Ruth 4:5; Xenophon *Convic.* II, 10.

the thought that ‘each one live in a sexually active way with his own wife.’”⁵³

Arguments against This View

Although this view has persuasive evidence, equally persuasive arguments stand against it.

Extrabiblical Evidence. If this view had many early patristic and more recent advocates, so does the view that interprets σκεῦος as “body” or “person.”

Validating σκεῦος as “wife” by locating the meaning from extrabiblical sources is problematic for numerous reasons: (1) Rabbinic parallels are late, and second-century Rabbinic Judaism may have used words with meanings that were not in existence in the first century AD.⁵⁴ (2) Paul used Greek rather than Hebrew, and σκεῦος is not “attested in Greek literature” as “wife”;⁵⁵ moreover, there is “no instance of כַּלָּה/σκεῦος having the direct sense of woman in the Rabbis.”⁵⁶ (3) This view’s suggestion that Paul denigrates women does not reconcile with Romans 16:1–3, 6–7, 12; 1 Corinthians 7:1–7; 9:5; 11:11–12; 16:19; Ephesians 5:22–33; Philippians 4:2–3; Colossians 3:19; and 1 Timothy 3:11. (4) Smith correctly charges that this view may be “too selective in that ‘vessel’ (כַּלָּה) is also used in other texts to refer to the person as a divine creation or to the body specifically.”⁵⁷

Allegedly, the evidence from Qumran for כַּלָּה as *wife* is weak. SW A 4Q416 2 ii 21 reads: “וְגַם אַל תִּקַּח כַּלָּה חֵיקְכָה” = “Furthermore, do not dishonor the vessel of your bosom.”

⁵³ Collins, “Will of God,” 313.

⁵⁴ Smith, “Impasse,” 71.

⁵⁵ Bassler, “Proposal,” 55 n. 10, corrects a common misunderstanding: “In 1 Peter 3:7 the wife is described using the *analogy* (not the metaphor) of ‘weaker vessel’ (ὡς ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει).”

⁵⁶ Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 361.

⁵⁷ Smith, “Impasse,” 71 n. 24, also notes that such examples are found in *Sipre Deut.* 48b; *b. Ned.* 50b; *b. Ta’an.* 20b.

Three convincing reasons argue against understanding כָּלִי as “wife” in SW A 4Q416 2 ii 21: (1) Why would an isolated sentence give attention to the wife, when lines 15–21 address ethical, not marital issues?⁵⁸ Thus, line 21 appears to address general ethical demands. (2) A section in context addressing the husband and wife (4Q416 2 iii – iv 13) is lengthy. (3) Why did the writer not use אִשָּׁה for *wife* as elsewhere in the same context? אִשָּׁה לְקַחְתָּהּ בְּרוּשְׁכָהּ, “When you take a wife in your lowly state . . .” (4Q416 2 iii 20).⁵⁹ Elgvin notes:

Only when he stresses the marital union between the spouses does he use אִשָּׁה חֵיקְכָהּ כִּי חֵיאָ שְׂאָר עַד [וְתַכָּה]; וְאִתָּה לְיַחַד, ‘Be together with the wife of your bosom, for she is the kin of [your bos]om,’ 4Q416 2 iv 5 . . . The use of אִשָּׁה חֵיקְכָהּ (and not אִשְׁתְּכָהּ or אִשָּׁה חֵיקְכָהּ) points to another meaning than ‘wife.’ There is no precedent for the use of כָּלִי for wife in the Bible or Hebrew literature of the second temple period.⁶⁰

Parallel Passages. Since Proverbs predates Paul, he would have had access to it. However, Smith convincingly notes two problems: “(a) Proverbs 5 does not use the operative word, σκεῦος; (b) the Hebrew imagery found in Proverbs 5 moves in different direction from the direction of 1 Thess 4:4.”⁶¹

First Corinthians 7:2, the other alleged conceptual parallel, is highly suspect on several fronts: (1) The overall context of 1 Corinthians 7:2 refers clearly to married couples. However, being or

⁵⁸ Cf. Elgvin, “Qumran,” 606, for a translation of lines 15–20.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 607, is the source for some of these arguments.

⁶⁰ Ibid. See also Smith, “Critical Parallel,” 501.

⁶¹ Smith, “Impasse,” 72. Thus, a woman is not to be viewed as a sexual instrument, which reading Proverbs 5 in light of rabbinic interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:4 may suggest. On the contrary, Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 366, argues for the interpretation “to use a woman as a vessel.” Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul*, J. B. Lightfoot’s Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul (London: Macmillan, 1895; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 55. Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles*, 70, believes Paul uses σκεῦος κτῆσθαι like *b. Meg.* 12b. Bassler, “Proposal,” 55, retorts that Paul’s argument in 1 Thess 4:3–8 centers on the ideas of holiness and honor. Hence, it is difficult to concede that with many other terms available to him Paul would use in this context one that conveys a view of women as “containers for semen.”

getting married is not clearly found in the context of 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8. (2) In 1 Corinthians 7:2, Yarbrough notes the difficulty of the general paraenesis for men and women, conversely distinct from the strict referent to men in 1 Thessalonians 4:4.⁶² It is different. McGehee notes that Yarbrough “does not explain why Paul, who clearly was unusual, did not follow his customary style in 1 Thessalonians 4.”⁶³ (3) Paul encourages celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7, but 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12 is silent on the issue. (4) The two contexts give opposite advice. That is, “marriage is viewed as a valid outlet for uncontrolled passion in 1 Cor 7 (vv. 2–5, 9, 36–37), but in 1 Thess 4:4–5 [if this be the correct view] one is to acquire a wife quite apart from lustful passion.”⁶⁴ (5) No real verbal similarities exist between these passages, other than two shared pronouns ἑκάστος and ἑαυτοῦ.⁶⁵ (6) The general paraenetic section, structure, and address of 1 Thessalonians does not accord well with a restrictive interpretation of “know how to acquire or live with your wife,” because it does not exhort women (and possibly married men).⁶⁶ (7) Paul’s use of σκεῦος as a metaphor for ‘wife’ seems contrary to his normal practice elsewhere of referring to wife as γυνή (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:27; 1 Corinthians 9:5; Ephesians 5:31; Titus 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:9).⁶⁷ Helmut Koester says, “Paul uses this formulation [σκεῦος] because he does not want to say γυνή (‘wife’). The

⁶² Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles*, 114–17, proposes an unlikely view. How could Paul introduce something so remote to the Thessalonians’ cultural context without any explanation?

⁶³ McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 84.

⁶⁴ Smith, “Impasse,” 73.

⁶⁵ McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 83.

⁶⁶ See Smith, “Impasse,” 77–78, and Raymond F. Collins, “The Unity of Paul’s Paraenesis in 1 Thess. 4:3–8: 1 Cor 7:1–7: A Significant Parallel,” in *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians*, BETL 66 (Leuven: University Press, 1984), 327. Collins is right about general paraenesis, but incorrectly denies that these verses address “specific reference to real life situation of the Thessalonian community.” See first section of this article. McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 84–85, notes that Paul’s paraenesis tends to address everyone.

⁶⁷ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGNT Commentary, ed. W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 152. Cf. Smith, “Impasse,” 75; Lightfoot, *Thessalonians*, 55. How likely is it that the Thessalonians read rabbinic works? Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 152, says, “Paul could not rely on them to make the kind of connection made by Maurer and others in arriving at this interpretation.”

choice of the neuter term σκεῦος emphasizes mutuality of sexual control.”⁶⁸

Furthermore, evidence for verbal parallels between 1 Peter 3:7 and 1 Thessalonians 4:4 fails close scrutiny. Translating σκεῦος as “wife” in 1 Peter 3:7 is unconvincing for three reasons: (1) As Smith notes, “the wife is not referred to as her husband’s ‘vessel,’ as in 1 Thess 4:4.” (2) Furthermore, “the comparative adjective ‘weaker;’ (ὀσθενεστέρος) implies that men are ‘vessels’ as well.”⁶⁹ Thus, “vessel” in 1 Peter 3:7 contextually refers to women having a weaker physical *body* than men. (3) Asserting a direct literary connection between 1 Peter 3:1–7 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 “is vulnerable at a number of points and has rightly been challenged.”⁷⁰

Syntax and Exegetical Significance. Interpreting εἰδέναι as “to know how to acquire a wife” seems “superfluous and absurd”; Scripture does not elsewhere suggest it is “man’s duty ‘to know how to procure a wife.’”⁷¹

Both BDAG and Zerwick and Grosvenor acknowledge that rendering κτάομαι as “take” or “acquire” depends on the meaning of σκεῦος. BDAG reads, “or: *gain control over his own body*; see σκεῦος 3),”⁷² and Zerwick and Grosvenor state, “if σκεῦος is not to be equated with ‘wife’ κτάομαι must be understood as *gaining possession* (= con-

⁶⁸ Helmut Koester, “1 Thessalonians—Experiment in Christian Writing,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntston Williams on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday, Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, ed. T. George, vol. 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 43 n. 23.

⁶⁹ Smith, “Impasse,” 70 nn. 20–21, demonstrates why “body” is better than “wife.”

⁷⁰ Ibid., 71 and 71 n. 22. See also Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Matthew Black (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 32–36; John H. Elliott, “The Rehabilitation of an Exegetical Step-Child: 1 Peter in Recent Research,” *JBL* 95 (June 1976): 246–47.

⁷¹ A. J. Mason, “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians,” in *Ellicott’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 138; Smith, “Impasse,” 74–75; Bassler, “Proposal,” 63–64.

⁷² BDAG, 572. Italics are original.

trol) of.”⁷³ We find the durative force appearing with the pluperfect and perfect tenses of κτῶμαι frequently in Classical Greek.⁷⁴

However, judging from papyri documents, “it would seem as if at least in the popular language this meaning was no longer confined to the perfect.”⁷⁵ J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan opt for interpreting κτῶμαι as having a durative force of the perfect tense: “gradually obtaining the complete mastery of the body.”⁷⁶

Rendering τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι as “to acquire a wife” or “to live with a wife” has persuasive arguments and many advocates. Even so, it is not ultimately persuasive.

View 3: To Control His Own Sexual Organ

Recently, compelling evidence has appeared supporting a narrower view, i.e., that τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι means “to control his own sexual organ.”⁷⁷ Elgvin suggests, “The proposal to understand σκεῦος in the more narrow meaning ‘sexual organ’ is preferable when all the evidence is taken into account.”⁷⁸

⁷³ Zerwick and Grosvenor, *Analysis of the Greek NT*, 618.

⁷⁴ Liddell et al., eds., *LSJM*, 1001; BDAG, 572, s.v. κτῶμαι.

⁷⁵ George Milligan, *St Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 49. Elgvin believes no sharp distinction should be maintained: “The papyrus evidence shows no clear borderline between the use of present and perfect in profane Greek . . . one of the Tebtunis papyri from 118 BC uses the infinitive κτᾶσθαι in the sense ‘take/have possession of.’ Another papyrus from 23 AD uses the infinitive κτήσεσθαι with the meaning ‘have,’” see Elgvin, “Qumran,” 611 n. 24, and Smith, “Impasse,” 83–84.

⁷⁶ J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 362, note that the NT does not use the perfect, but cite present usages in early papyri with this meaning. Thus, it is probable that NT writers used the present tense with a perfect meaning.

⁷⁷ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 152, suggests, “It seems better to understand σκεῦος as connoting the human body in its sexual aspect, that is, as a euphemism for the genitalia.” He lists a number of advocates of this approach.

⁷⁸ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 616.

Arguments for this View

Extrabiblical Evidence. The meaning of σκεῦος as a *sexual organ* has support in Greek literature. Maurer presents two examples of this use: *Anthologia Graeca* 16, 243, line 4, Antitios (first century AD); and *De Natura Animalium* 17, 11, Claudius Aelianus (first/third century AD).⁷⁹ This evidence suggests to Elgvin a close parallel to the passage in question: “When this use of σκεῦος is attested in Greek contemporary literature with the New Testament, it should be close at hand also in the interpretation of 1 Thess 4:4.”⁸⁰

Even in Rabbinic literature, *b. Meb* 12b and others, the meaning “wife” for כְּלִי is highly questionable. Hence, Elgvin argues from this and other rabbinic texts for a meaning “wife’s organ”:

b. Meb 12b/*Esther R.* 1.11 puts the phrase כְּלִי שֶׁאֲנִי מִשְׁתֵּשׁ וּב (“the vessel which I use”) in the mouth of Ahasveros about Vashti (the source ascribes this saying to two different fourth-century sages). This text, as well as the story on Rabbi Judah’s wooing, *b. Baba Mezia* 84b/⁸¹*Pesiqta* 94b/y. *Shab.* 10.6;/*Qoh. R.* 11.2, shows that לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בְּכֵלִי ‘to use a vessel’ is a talmudic euphemism for a man’s sexual relationship with his wife [*b. Meg* 12b]. It should be noted, however, that in both sayings כְּלִי means either the wife’s organ (for the use of her husband) or the wife in the role of sexual object. The rabbinic material rather supports a narrow interpretation of כְּלִי/σκεῦος as ‘sexual organ’ than the more general ‘wife’ (as asserted by previous scholarship on this issue). These

⁷⁹ Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 359. See H. Beckby, *Anthologia Graeca* (Munich: Ernst Heimeran, 1958), 16, 243, line 4; See also Elgvin, “Qumran,” 617 n. 45.

⁸⁰ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 617.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 610 n. 22, correlates the rabbinic text above and 1 Samuel 21:6, concluding: “According to *b. Baba Mezia* 84b (and parallels) Judah the Prince (c. 180 AD) asked the widow of Rabbi Eleazar b. Simeon to marry him, she then sends him reply חוּלִי כְּלִי שֶׁנִּשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בוֹ ‘should the vessel which has been used by a holy man, be used by a secular one?’ Her vessel had been used by a *kohen*, and should henceforth not be used by a layman. The saying is so pregnant that the context given to it by the sources must be historical. It alludes to the wording of 1 Sam 21:6 (cf. the words חוּלִי, קוֹרֵשׁ, כְּלִי), and demonstrates that this verse was understood in its plain sense (including כְּלִי in the meaning sexual organ) throughout the mishnaic and talmudic times.”

rabbinic texts leave no doubt that they use כְּלִי for ‘wife as sexual object/the wife’s organ.’⁸²

A Qumran paraenetic text may well support the *sexual organ* view 1 Thessalonians 4:4. The phrase כְּלִי חֵיקְבָהּ (“the vessel of your bosom”) found in SW A 4Q416 2 ii 21 helps here. Evidence in the way the copies 4Q415 and 4Q416 were found rolled up by having the “beginning on the inside of the scroll when they were deposited the last time” suggests that these scrolls were indeed actively used in common everyday reading up until at least AD 68.⁸³

The entire context of 4Q416 2 ii 15–21, where line 21 appears, seems to parallel 1 Thessalonians 4:4:

Also, do not humble your soul before someone who is not your equal, otherwise you will b[e] his [servant]. Do not strike someone who does not have strength, lest you stumble and be put greatly to shame. [Do not se]ll your soul for money. It is better for you to be a servant in the spirit, so that you serve your hard employer without payment. [Do not se]ll your glory for a price, and do not pledge your inheritance for money, lest this dispossess your body <in slavery>. Do not fill yourself with bread when you lack clothing. Do not drink wine when there is no food. Do not request luxury when you lack bread. Do not boast about your lowly estate—you are poor—lest your life be despised.⁸⁴

[Now line 21:]

וְגַם אֵל תִּקַּל כְּלִי חֵיקְבָהּ = “Furthermore, do not dishonor the vessel of your bosom.”

As a result of line 19 referring to a lack of clothing, “The logical interpretation of ‘do not dishonour the vessel of your bosom’ in context is: remember to be clothed decently, in the framework of a meal one

⁸² Ibid., 610.

⁸³ Ibid., 604. Torleif Elgvin, “The Reconstruction of Sapiential Work A,” *RQ* 16 (1995): 565 n. 13, points out that Cave 1 contained the most important copies to the Qumran community.

⁸⁴ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 606, translated this paragraph and line 21 is the writer's translation.

should be careful not to uncover one's bosom with its organ."⁸⁵ Elgvin supplies numerous Qumran passages (*Manual of Discipline*, 1QS 7.12–14/4QD^b 18 iv 9–12) that speak of covering the male genitalia, especially in gatherings where meals were shared.⁸⁶

When the uses of כְּלִי as a euphemism for the male genitalia are compared in the DSS and Old Testament passages, the evidence seems overwhelming:

1. The following DSS and OT passages use euphemisms for male genitalia: 1QM 7.6–7; 1QS 7.14–16; 1QIsa^a 65.3; 4QD^b [4Q267] 18 iv.9–12; 11QT^a [11Q19] 46.13; Exodus 4:25; 2 Samuel 11:8; Canticles 5:4; Isaiah 7:20; 57:8.⁸⁷

2. Smith notes, “The term כְּלִי appears to be used in 1 Samuel 21:6 as a euphemism for the male sexual organ.”⁸⁸ Elgvin also says, “Sap. Work A is, as many Qumran compositions, heavily influenced by biblical style. The phrasing of the term כְּלִי חִיקְכָה for the male organ was probably influenced by the expression (אִשְׁתְּ חִיקְךָ/חִיקוֹ) ‘the wife of your /his bosom,’ Deut 13:7; 28:54 ... and the use of כְּלִי ‘vessel’ in 1 Sam 21:6.”⁸⁹

The evidence above suggests that כְּלִי חִיקְכָה (“vessel of your bosom”) may be euphemistic for male genitalia. This evidence from the context of 4Q416 2 ii 15–21, as well as evidence cited for view no. 2, seems to support this reading over the one that understands the phrase as the “wife of your bosom.”

⁸⁵ Ibid., 608.

⁸⁶ Qumran documents 1QS 7.12–14/4QD^b 18 iv 9–12 read as follows according to Elgvin, “Qumran,” 608 n. 14: “Whoever walks about naked in front of his fellow, without having been forced to do so, he shall do penance for six months. . . . Whoever takes out his ‘hand’ [euphemism for ‘uncovers his penis’] from under his clothes, or if these are rags which allow his nakedness to be seen, he will be punished thirty days.’ Although these rules about nakedness are generally formulated, they would be particularly enforced in the meetings or meals of many. The parallel to the section on meal manners in Sap. Work A is not farfetched.” See also Smith, “Critical Parallel,” 503.

⁸⁷ Ibid.; Smith, “Critical Parallel,” 502.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 608.

Numerous other uses of the Greek σκεῦος and ἀγγεῖον and their Latin equivalent, *vas*, establish that the terms were used as a euphemism for the sexual organ/genitalia are well documented by Smith:

1. Aelian *Nat. an.* 17.11 (ca. 165–230 CE): Aelian maintains that one of the symptoms of a spider bit is that the victim's 'member stands up' (ὀρθοῦται σκεῦος).
2. Pseudo-Callisthenes *Alexander Romance* 1.8.4: In explaining the 'sealing-up' of his wife's womb, Philip's drea,-interpreter indicates, 'For on one seals up an empty vessel, but only one that has something in it'... That ἀγγεῖον (a synonym of σκεῦος) is a euphemism for womb....
3. Plautus *Poen.* 863 (Act 4 scene 2; ca. 250–184 BCE):
Milphio: What are you doing?
Syncerastus: Something seldom accomplished by adulterers, once they're caught.
Milphio: What is that?
Syncerastus: Taking my utensils [*vasa*] home intact
 That *vas* here refers to the male organ is accepted by P. G. W. Glare (ed.), *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 2014....
4. Petronius *The Satyricon* 24.7 (d. 66 CE): ...she also let her hand drift into his lap and handled his little tool [*vasculo*].
5. The *Priapea* 68:23–26:
 What else we read? How Circe—And Calypso too—
 Dulichian Ulysses for his fine tool [*vasa*] they woo.... That *vas* here refers to male organ is accepted by Glare, *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2014.
6. Augustine *Civ.* 14.23: 'The organ [*vas*] created for this work would have sown its seed.'⁹⁰

Parallel Passages. There are also conceptual parallel passages in the Old Testament that use the term בֶּטֶן, meaning *bosom* or *lap*, with sexual connotations: Genesis 16:5; Deuteronomy 13:7 [6 MT]; 28:54, 56; 2 Samuel 12:8; 1 Kings 1:2; Proverbs 5:20; 6:27; Micah 7:5, and

⁹⁰ Smith, "Impasse," 94–95.

also “the phrase ‘vessel of thy bosom’ naturally calls to mind the sexual organs.”⁹¹ Twice in 1 Corinthians 12:22–24, Paul seems to parallel τιμή (“honor”) with the sexual organ (which may be one of *those members of the body*), as the term τιμή may be used with σκεῦος to imply sexual organ in 1 Thessalonians 4:4.⁹²

Some Old Testament verbal parallels suggest that כְּלִי refers specifically to genitalia (i.e., male organ). 1 Samuel 21:6 [MT] uses כְּלִי twice. Both are translated σκεῦος in the LXX “as a euphemism for male sexual organ.”⁹³ The above evidence in 4Q416 2 ii 21 seems to support the reading of כְּלִי (the Hebrew use of the Greek σκεῦος) as a euphemism for genitalia.⁹⁴

Syntax and Exegetical Significance. The context in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 certainly argues for controlling one’s sexual drive. The main phrase, τοῦτο γάρ ἐστὶν θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ (“for this is the will of God”), with its controlling verb ἐστὶν from 4:3–6 argues for understanding God’s will as being set apart (holiness = ἁγιασμός) from sexual sins.

Furthermore, κτᾶσθαι, as the reply to view no. 2 above shows (and as the following section will conclusively establish), can certainly carry a durative force.⁹⁵ Maurer acknowledges a paradigm shift in Greek and Jewish use of the ingressive *to acquire* to the durative force *to control or possess*, when using the present tense.⁹⁶ Even if the ingressive meaning of κτᾶσθαι appears more in the New Testament,

⁹¹ Smith, “Critical Parallel,” 502.

⁹² Ibid., 504.

⁹³ Ibid., 502; Smith, “Impasse,” 92–93. See also J. Whitton, “A Neglected Meaning for *SKEUOS* in 1 Thessalonians 4:4,” *NTS* 28 (January 1982): 142; Elgvin, “Qumran,” 607–8. Maurer, “*skeuos*,” 360.

⁹⁴ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 607–9. See also Smith, “Impasse,” 93; Smith, “Critical Parallel,” 502–3.

⁹⁵ Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 153, says, “κτᾶσθαι probably has the sense ‘to gain control or mastery’ here, and even though the pronouns are masculine the instruction to gain mastery over the desires associated with the genital organs would apply equally to women.”

⁹⁶ Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 366.

Maurer correctly acknowledges that Paul, who spoke Greek and Hebrew, could have easily given κτᾶσθαι a durative force.⁹⁷

What then is the sense of τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι? Regardless of how one takes κτᾶσθαι here, Elgvin concludes:

The debate over the ingressive vs. durative senses of κτᾶσθαι might not be so crucial as claimed by a number of scholars. Even if one grants the ingressive meaning in this case, one could still translate: “. . . that each one of you knows how to get in control of your sex organ [=passions].”⁹⁸

Arguments against This View

Extrabiblical Evidence. Even though Elgvin acknowledges that *body* is the usual patristic understanding of σκεῦος, he gives no reason why the Fathers would ignore such a meaning in favor of the meaning “sexual organ.”⁹⁹ They were closer to Paul than anyone today, so they were in a good position to understand his meaning.

Rabbinic evidence seems to establish the meaning of כְּלִי as sexual organ /genitalia. However, the advocates of both the *wife* view and the *genitalia* view cite the same rabbinic text—*b. Meg* 12b—as proof. Thus, the issue seems more ambiguous than both sides care to admit. However, the sexual organ view is preferable, because of the absence of rabbinic usage where כְּלִי has a direct sense of woman.¹⁰⁰

The same Qumran evidence is also used to validate *wife* as the meaning of וְגַם אֵל תִּקַּח כֵּלֵי הַיִּקְבָּה = “Furthermore, do not dishonor the vessel of your bosom.” However, as noted above, the view for sexual organ seems to have a stronger support. Yet, context of 4Q416 2 ii 15–21 may also argue for *body* in a general sense, not just genitalia. However, this seems harder to substantiate because of the lack of evidence.

⁹⁷ Ibid. See also Whitton, “Neglected Meaning for *SKEUOS*,” 142.

⁹⁸ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 613.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 616–17.

¹⁰⁰ Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 361.

Parallel Passages. Lack of direct verbal parallel, other than 1 Samuel 21:6 is a problem. The term σκεῦος is not used in a single direct New Testament biblical reference that *clearly* refers to sexual organ/genitalia. In addition, the use of כֶּלִי in 1 Samuel 21:6 is removed by over 1,000 years from 1 Thessalonians 4:4, and whether כֶּלִי here means what Elgvin, Smith, and others claim it does is debatable. For example, S. R. Driver believes כֶּלִי (“vessel”) could either mean “the utensils in which the young men would put the bread were clean ceremonially when they set out,” or perhaps “bodies,” as σκεῦος, in 1 Thessalonians 4:4.¹⁰¹ Albert Barnes believes כֶּלִי (“vessel”) could mean clothes (Deuteronomy 22:5), wallets (1 Samuel 17:40), “other articles which might be Levitically unclean and need cleansing” (Leviticus 13:58; Exodus 19:10), or a person who washes, as in Mark 7:4.¹⁰²

Syntax and Exegetical Significance. Contextually, unless σκεῦος refers to both the male and female genitalia, Elgvin’s criticism against the *wife* view applies here.¹⁰³ That is, if σκεῦος means penis, then Paul leaves out women, who could equally fall under πορνεία. Hence, Elgvin believes Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4 “has both male and female Christians in mind.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, this makes for a valid argument in the immediate (4:1–8) and general context of the book.

One could argue for the New Testament normal present progressive meaning of κτάομαι (“to acquire”). However, ample evidence exists to suggest the present tense of κτάομαι could have been used with a perfect durative meaning of “to control” or “to possess.”

Τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι could perhaps mean, if taken as both male and female genitalia, “to master/control one’s own sexual

¹⁰¹ S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 139.

¹⁰² Albert Barnes, *Samuel*, Barnes’ Notes: The Bible Commentary, Exodus to Ruth, ed. F. C. Cook (London: Murray, 1879; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 52.

¹⁰³ See Elgvin, “Qumran,” 614. Whitton, “Neglected Meaning for *SKEUOS*,” 142, notes that “כֶּלִי is a euphemism for the *male organ*” (italics mine). For the same observation, see Smith, “Critical Parallel,” 502–4.

¹⁰⁴ Elgvin, “Qumran,” 618.

organ/genitalia/sexual drive.” This option is more likely than the others. Nevertheless, for a lack of another clear Pauline use of this concept and the term σκεῦος, the following interpretation may have a stronger case.

View 4: To Control His Own Body

The meaning “to control your own body”¹⁰⁵ is a common view of 1 Thessalonians 4:4. This view interprets κτάομαι not as ingressive but durative, and σκεῦος as a metaphor for “body.”

Arguments for This View

As with the previous view, arguments for this view are very persuasive. The following will briefly show the best arguments that support interpreting τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι as “to control/master his own body.”

Extrabiblical Evidence. The advocates of interpreting σκεῦος as “body” include Tertullian, Chrysostom, Theodoret, Theophylactus, John Damascene, Pelagius, Cajetan, and Ambrosiaster,¹⁰⁶ Calvin, Theodore Bèze, Dibelius, Rigaux, Bahnsen, Martin Sanchez, Wolniewicz, Merk, Rossano, Bruce, McGehee, Milligan, Wanamaker, and Morris.¹⁰⁷

In Rabbinic literature, כֵּלִי is commonly used in a transferred sense for a person’s body as a “vessel” (i.e., a weapon or tool) that is either controlled by someone or is created. Maurer says, “When man is called a כֵּלִי, the first pt., on the basis of the metaphor of the potter, is that he is created by God and is used as an instrument either by God or the devil.”¹⁰⁸ Maurer shows various examples of how כֵּלִי (“vessel”) appears metaphorically used in rabbinic literature for a “person” or “body”:

¹⁰⁵ NIV, NEB, REB, NRSV, NJB, NET Bible, RSV^{mg}, and TEV^{mg} render σκεῦος as *body*.

¹⁰⁶ See the following for patristic evidence: Adinolfi, “La Santita,” 168–71; Avotri, “One’s Vessel,” 16–31; Smith, “Impasse,” 65.

¹⁰⁷ Collins, “Will of God,” 312, notes most of these recent commentators.

¹⁰⁸ Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 360. See *B Ber.*, 28a.

The idea that man, like a hollow vessel, contains something yields another transf. use. In his totality he is thus the container for the devil or God dwelling with him, or else *his body is the vessel* which contains the human soul. The former use is rooted in Jewish thought, the latter in Gk. thought in which the body is a prison of the soul [cf. 4 Esdra 7:88 and Migr. Abr., 193].¹⁰⁹

The use of כֵּלִי (“vessel”) metaphorically for “body” or “person” is well attested in later Judaism.

Qumran evidence from 4Q416 2 ii 15–21, as seen above, may also argue for “body” in a general sense, not just genitalia. Smith includes this argument under his third option: “Interpretation Three: ‘Control Your Own Body in Holiness and Honor.’”¹¹⁰

Parallel Passages. The strongest case for all the views is made here. There are numerous Pauline parallel conceptual and verbal passages where σκεῦος means “body,” and especially when Paul speaks of abstaining from sexual immorality. (1) 2 Corinthians 4:7 speaks of having τὸν θησαυρὸν τοῦτον ἐν ὄστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν (“this treasure in earthen vessels”).¹¹¹ This refers to the corporeal aspect of man, i.e., the body with its frailty. (2) Romans 9:21–23 uses the word σκεῦος three times: τιμὴν σκεῦος (“vessel for honor”), σκεύη ὀργῆς (“vessels of wrath”), and σκεύη ἐλέους (“vessels of mercy”). Not only does τιμὴ appear here together with σκεῦος, as in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, but each reference here clearly means “persons/human beings.” (3) 2 Timothy 2:21–22a says, *Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor [σκεῦος εἰς τιμὴν], sanctified [ἡγιασμένον] and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. Flee also youthful lusts [ἐπιθυμίας].* Paul’s use of the three terms along with the sexual concept (as the underlined terms and phrase show above) clearly defines how the whole person/body (σκεῦος) is in view. This verse is particularly important, because not

¹⁰⁹ Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 360 (italics added for emphasis).

¹¹⁰ Smith, “Impasse,” 90, 92–95.

¹¹¹ Lightfoot, *Thessalonians*, 54, says that people object to using this verse because no exact NT parallel exists. However, he notes that σκεῦος “is sufficiently near, and the term ‘vessel of the soul, vessel of the spirit,’ which is commonly applied to the body by moralists.”

only do three identical terms appear here as in 1 Thessalonians 4:4–5, but the concept of sexual purity appears as well.

(4) One can also argue from specific passages (as the following will show) or the entire book of 1 Corinthians that this epistle addresses sexual purity of all Christians—married or single—describing it as maintaining one’s vessel/body holy, as does 1 Thessalonians 4:3–4.¹¹² (5) The most persuasive argument of all occurs in the parallel in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20.¹¹³

1 Thessalonians 4:3–4	1 Corinthians 6:18, 20
ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας <i>you abstain from sexual immorality</i>	Φεύγετε τὴν πορνείαν <i>Flee sexual immorality</i>
τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι ἐν ἁγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ <i>to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable (NIV)</i>	δοξάσατε δὴ τὸν θεὸν ἐν τῷ σώματι ὑμῶν <i>Therefore honor God with your body (NIV)</i>

A close look at these parallel passages shows similar arguments for his converts to behave in a sexually proper manner. A further confirmation exists, showing how close of a relationship these two passages have by the similar concept found between 1 Thessalonians 4:8 and 1 Corinthians 6:19:

1 Thessalonians 4:8	1 Corinthians 6:19
τὸν θεὸν τὸν καὶ δίδοντα τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ τὸ ἅγιον εἰς ὑμᾶς <i>God who gives you his Holy</i>	τοῦ ἐν ὑμῖν ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐστὶν οὗ ἔχετε ἀπὸ θεοῦ <i>the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from</i>

¹¹² Even Collins, “1 Thess. 4:3–8 and 1 Cor 7:1–7,” 327, who rejects this view, acknowledges the “general ethical instruction” for all Christians found in 1 Thessalonians 4. See also Collins, “Will of God,” 307–8.

¹¹³ Rigaux, *Saint Paul: Les Épîtres aux Thessaloniens*, 506, agrees that this is the most persuasive argument, as Smith also notes. The following argument and format was adapted from Smith, “Impasse,” 97–98.

<i>Spirit</i>	<i>God</i>
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Smith notes many other striking conceptual parallels between 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 and 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 far too numerous to cite here. Other passages like Romans 6:13b, 12–13a, 19 compared with 1 Thessalonians 4:3–7 and 5:22–24, also show conceptual parallels for maintaining one’s vessel/body holy.¹¹⁴

Syntax and Exegetical Significance. Contextually, the paraenesis of the letter addressed to a general audience argues for understanding *body* as “vessel.” This view also fits with the general cultural situation in Thessalonica with its pagan promiscuous cults.¹¹⁵

According to Smith, the syntax here can be argued as follows:

Verse 3b and vv. 4–5 of 1 Thessalonians 4 share a common structure (each has an infinitive that defines τούτο, v. 1),¹¹⁶ a common audience (ὑμᾶς; ἕκαστον ὑμῶν), and a common focus of concern (πορνεία; πάθει ἐπιθυμίας). These parallels suggest that the admonition in v. 4a (σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι) has the same general applicability (i.e., audience) and intent as the injunction in v. 3b (“that you abstain from sexual immorality”).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ See Smith, “Impasse,” 98–99. Also see the parallel between Rom 1:24 and 1 Thess 4:4–5 (ibid., 99). See also McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 85.

¹¹⁵ McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 84–85, substantiates the content of this paragraph; Elgvin, “Qumran,” 614–15; Smith, “Impasse,” 100–1.

¹¹⁶ Smith, “Impasse,” 100, correctly notes that most interpret the infinitive ἀπέχεσθαι as an appositive to τούτο (or ἁγιασμός). He also says, “Εἰδέναι, on the other hand, is understood as either (1) parallel to ἀπέχεσθαι and thus in apposition to τούτο.” This would mean the will of God would imply purity from sexual sins and immorality. See John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*, ed. William Young (London: MacMillan, 1877), 126; Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Gramatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians, with a Revised Translation* (London: Parker, West Strand, 1858), 52; Milligan, *1 Thessalonians*, 50; Maurer, “σκεῦος,” 366 n. 57.

¹¹⁷ Smith, “Impasse,” 100.

Thus, “σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι appears to be an injunction concerning πορνεῖα that applies to all of the Thessalonians.”¹¹⁸

Earlier sections of this article argued for a durative force of κτᾶσθαι (“possess,” “keep” or “control”). Further exhaustive evidence noted by Smith supports a durative force meaning of the non-perfect form of κτᾶσθαι:

1. Prov 1:14: ‘Let us all have [κτησώμεθα] a common purse, and let us have [γενηθήτω] one pouch.’ Isa 1:3: ‘The ox knows his owner: [κτησάμενον].’ See also Ps 138:13; Isa 57:13; Jer 16:19; ezek 8:3; Sir 22:23; J Lust, E. Eynikel, and K. Hauspie, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992–96) 2.269; Maure, ‘σκεῦος,’ 366.
2. P.Tebt. 1.5.241–43 (118 BCE): ‘Nor shall any other person take possession of or use the tools required for cloth-weaving or byssus-manufacture [μηδ ἀτησάμενον ἄλλους κτᾶσθαι μηδε χρῆσθαι τοῖς τε λιυθαντικός καὶ βυσσαυργικῶς εργαλείοις].’ Rigaux maintain that the fundamental idea of κτᾶσθαι here is durative (*Thessaloniens*, 505).
3. Aesop *Fab.* 289 (Teubner; Budé: 325): ‘except for the trumpet, I possess nothing [πλὴν γὰρ τοῦ χαλκοῦ τούτο οὐδὲν ἄλλο κτῶμαι].’ Aesop lived in the early 6th century BCE and may well go back into the pre-Christian era. See É. Chambry, *Ésope Fables* (Budé; Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1927) xlv-xlviii; S. A. Handford, *Fables of Aesop* (rev. ed.; New York: Penguin, 1964) xvii-xix; B. E. Perry, *Studies in the Text History of the Life and Fables of Aesop* (American Philological Association Monograph Series; Lancaster, Pa.: Lancaster Press, 1936; reprint, Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981) 156.
4. Philo *Mos.* 1,160: ‘Some who . . . possess [κτησάμενοι] a soul kindly and propitious and free from all viciousness.’ See also *Ebr.* 167; *Mut.* 164; *Virt.* 98, and possibly *Abr.* 34, 37; *Cher.* 19; *Agr.* 150; *Flacc.* 130; *Hypoth.* 11.4; *Ios.* 37; *Legat.* 155; *Leg.* 1.77; 3.193; *Mos.* 1.152, 159; *Mut.* 80, 183; *Praem.* 27, 59; *Her.* 110; *Prob.* 149; *Spec.* 2.168.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. See also Bassler, “Proposal,” 54–56. William Neil, *The Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians*, MNTC, ed. James Moffatt (New York: Harper, 1950), 80, says, “There is therefore no reason why the more attractive translation of the whole sentence should not also be thought that was in Paul’s mind, namely, that the Thessalonians should regard their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit.”

5. Luke 18:12 (possibly): I give tithes of all that I possess [κτῶμαι].¹¹⁹ See LSJ[M], 1001. Luke 21:19 (possibly): ‘By your perseverance you will preserve [κτῆσεσθε] your lives,’ or ‘By your patience possess [κτῆσασθε] your souls.’ See NKJV.
6. Josephus *Ant.* 5.1.16 §54: ‘they were to have possession [κτῆσθαι] of the land of Canaan bestowed upon them.’ The translation is from W. Whiston, *The Works of Josephus* (rev. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hnedrickson, 1987). The LCL translation is similar, also understanding κτῆσθαι in the sense of ‘possession.’ See also *Ant.* 4.1.1 §5, 4.4.3 §67, 4.6.2 §102, 4.7.4 §173, 4.8.2 §§182, 189, 190; 4.8.5 §199; 4.8.8 §205; 4.8.22 §241; 5.1.13 §39; 5.1.25 §93; 7.5.5 §114; 17.10.9 §287; 18.6.8 §207; 19.2.1 §162; 19.2.2 §177; 19.3.2 §225; 19.4.3 §248 (“Impasse,” 84-85).

The use of the durative force meaning of the non-perfect form of κτᾶσθαι is well documented.

The phrase τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι here supports a meaning “to control/master his or her own body in a holy and honorable way.” This accords well with the external and internal New Testament evidence. It also fits with the cultural and contextual problems present in Thessalonica. This view further accounts for all, not just single men or married people, in the Thessalonian church. This view fits well with the immediate context, which gives no clues for any sub-group, but a general paraenesis to all.¹¹⁹

Arguments against this View

Several arguments are made against this view. Briefly, Smith surfaces the following three objections: (1) In context, the phrase ἀπέχεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ τῆς πορνείας in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 is followed by a positive, permissive phrase suggesting that means “to satisfy one’s own sexual impulse in sanctity and honor.”¹²⁰ This objection, however, ignores that Paul uses the infinitive that tells one “how to” do it by “controlling/mastering one’s own body in sanctity and honor.”

¹¹⁹ McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 88, also notices, Paul’s advice would follow his usual pattern of exhorting all members of a community. Finally, it would resemble other Pauline exhortations to sexual purity for both married and single Christians (see 1 Cor. 6–7; 2 Tim. 2:20–22).

¹²⁰ Lünemann, Alford, Eadie, Ellicott, Jowett, and Ridderbos object here.

(2) Without having the adjective ὀστρακίνοις qualifying σκεῦος (as 2 Cor 4:7), the term does not mean “body.”¹²¹ However, as seen above, σκεῦος appears without the qualifying adjective and continues to mean “body.”¹²² Furthermore, as Lightfoot and Smith point out, the adjective is unnecessary here because the context clearly suggest the meaning “body,” since the subject matter is sexual immorality.¹²³

(3) If σκεῦος means “body,” Paul’s emphasis in using ἑαυτοῦ seems unnecessary and redundant, but if it means “wife,” it is highly appropriate, since using someone else’s wife might have been the very problem being addressed. This objection, however, disregards that ἑαυτοῦ lost much of its emphatic force in Hellenistic Greek and often substitutes for possessive pronouns (αὐτοῦ—“his”; αὐτῆς—“her”).¹²⁴ Furthermore, Paul uses ἑαυτοῦ elsewhere with reference to a person’s own body (Rom 4:19; Eph 5:28–29).¹²⁵

(4) Since κτᾶσθαι normally has an ingressive meaning, the normal use here should be “to acquire.”¹²⁶ This objection ignores the fact that in Hellenistic Greek the present tense was used to express the durative force to mean “to control, possess or master.”

Conclusion

What is the practicality of a study such as this? McGehee aptly answers:

the theological consequences dependent upon how one renders this verse are considerable. In the sense put forward by

¹²¹ Lünemann, Alford, Ellicott, and Eadie object to this line of reasoning.

¹²² Ellicott, *Thessalonians*, 52.

¹²³ Lightfoot, *Thessalonians*, 54; Smith, “Impasse,” 101–2.

¹²⁴ Moulton and Milligan, *NT Vocabulary*, 177. *BDAG*, 269.

¹²⁵ Smith, “Impasse,” 102. This writer is indebted to Smith for the preceding three objections and replies. Collins, “Will of God,” 313, sees the difficulty in taking σκεῦος as “body” because of the stress the reflexive pronoun conveys. McGehee, “Rejoinder,” 87, answers, “But one might as well ask why use the reflexive pronoun in ‘his own wife’? What other body (or wife) would the early Christians have thought a man to have control over?”

¹²⁶ Bassler, “Proposal,” 54. See also Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 227.

the *RSV*, Yarbrough, and Collins, Paul seems to denigrate sexual desire, even within marriage. That indeed may have been Paul's view. On the other hand, Paul's understanding of sexual activity may have been closer to that of the Song of Solomon than to that of a Victorian Moralist. In any case, one will need a consensus on 1 Thessalonians 4:4 before proposing a definitive interpretation.¹²⁷

Thus, after observing the four major views of the phrase τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, the evidence favors the last option, "to control/master his own body." Although Paul could have used σκεῦος euphemistically for sexual organs of both sexes,¹²⁸ the lack of biblical evidence either in Pauline or any other writer's use of such a term argues against this view.

However, the biblical evidence favors interpreting τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι to mean "to control/master his or her own body in a holy and honorable way."

(1) This accords well with the external and internal New Testament evidence. (2) It fits the cultural and contextual problems present in Thessalonica. (3) This view accounts for everyone, not just single men or married people, in the Thessalonian church. (4) This view fits the immediate context, which indicates that it is not addressed to any specific group, but is rather a general paraenesis of the letter. (5) Lexical meaning and grammar also favors this view. And (6) This view does not seem to suffer from any major objections.

One must admit, as Smith does, that the phrase τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι may not be the best way to express the concept of mastering one's body in sanctity and in an honorable manner.¹²⁹ Yet, a

¹²⁷ McGehee, "Rejoinder," 89 n. 14.

¹²⁸ Smith, "Impasse," 103 n. 133, says, "Even if σκεῦος did indeed refer primarily to the male organ, it seems to be a small step for Paul to broaden its referent, especially since a euphemism is involved, to conclude the genitalia of both sexes." However, such a "small step" in order to be accepted—over the substantiated view of *body*—would need more validation showing how Paul or others used *skeuos* to mean *sexual organs* for *both sexes*, not just for that of the male (see n. 118).

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

metaphor is usually not a straightforward concept, but “a comparison in which one thing is, acts like, or represent another.”¹³⁰ In this case, the phrase in question represents Paul’s way of saying to the Thessalonians that each one should “control his own body” (NIV).

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¹³⁰ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 148.