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ORAL TEACHINGS OF OLD WOMEN IN 1 TIMOTHY 4:7¹

Abstract

The paper attempts to consider the possibility that the expression γραώδεις μῦθοι used in 1 Timothy 4:7 might refer to oral teachings conveyed by older women in Ephesus. It can be observed that in the Pastoral Epistles, the word μῦθοι denotes false teachings which stand in sharp contrast with the truth contained in the written Scriptures. The context of 1 Timothy may suggest the possibility that older women could convey such oral teachings in the space of the οἶκος, which was a natural ecclesiastical environment of the earliest Christian church.

Keywords: Pastoral Epistles, myth, New Testament, orality, Paul of Tarsus, early Christianity

¹ The paper develops some ideas contained in: S. Torbus, *Baśnie starych kobiet w 1 Tm 4, 7. Wokół interpretacji przymiotnika graodes*, "Theologica Wratislaviensia" 10 (2015), pp. 139–149. The above paper focuses on the interpretation of the meaning of the adjective γραώδεις in the context of the ancient household, while here we concentrate more on the understanding of the oral connotations of the μῦθοι.

Introduction

The paper points out a few observations that might support the hypothesis that the expression *γραῶδεις μῦθοι* (fables of old women) used in 1 Timothy 4:7 could denote oral teachings conveyed by older women in the church of Ephesus. The idea is inspired by the interpretations presented by F.M. Young² and M.Y. MacDonald.³ The conclusions drawn by these scholars run counter to the opinion of many commentators who claim that the discussed expression *γραῶδεις μῦθοι*, which is used in 1 Tm 4:7 (*But reject those worthless myths told by elderly women*)⁴ is only a contemptuous description of some false, unorthodox teachings, referring to the negative stereotype of the older women in ancient Greece.⁵

Negative view of older women in the ancient culture

This popular view is supported by almost univocal results of the research on the dominance of the stereotypical pejorative image of the older women in the Greek culture.⁶ From the research emerges a sad picture of older women living in the margin of the Greek society and surrounded by common disdain. Bremmer's statement coming from his influential text constitutes a good synthesis of this view: "in ancient Greece, old women constituted a marginal category, which was loathed and feared by males".⁷ In the context of this paper, it is worth paying attention to the weight attached to the citations

² YOUNG 1994, 8;119.

³ MacDONALD 1988, 176–183.

⁴ Translation from the Lexham English Bible.

⁵ FEE 1988, 103: "a sarcastic expression often used in philosophical polemic comparing an opponent's position to the tales perpetuated by the older women of those cultures as they would sit around weaving and the like"; ZEHR 2010, 99: "This culturally prejudicial term was used to ridicule uneducated women".

⁶ COKAYNE (2003, 134–152) comments the source texts, where the older women are depicted as garrulous, credulous. They are also promiscuous and prone to alcoholism.

⁷ BREMMER 1987, 204.

from Greek and Latin literature, where one can find the adjective γραιώδης, the noun γραιῦς, as well as the Latin expression: *aniles fabulae*,⁸ which are used pejoratively referring to the garrulousness and credulity of the older women. The stereotypical older woman was often presented in ancient literature as a loquacious and unreasonable person. Besides, she usually drank too much and was promiscuous. Based on this stereotype, Plato⁹ and Chrysippus referred in several passages to the idle talk of old women, and Poseidonios spoke about incredible stories told by them.¹⁰ Thus, the women are presented to the reader as persons who tend to narrate untrustworthy fictitious tales, far from the truth. At first sight, such a picture seems to fit very well with the description of untrustworthy teachers preaching a false doctrine. However, a closer analysis of the context can reveal weaknesses of the position and suggest an alternative solution, which will be briefly summarised below.

Positive view of women in Pauline churches

First of all, it should be observed that the words sarcastically expressing such a contemptuous attitude towards older women stand at odds with the prescription to respect older women and men, which begins the next chapter of the letter: “Do not rebuke an older man, but appeal to him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, with all purity” (5:1–2)¹¹. In the following part of the letter, the author calls for respect towards “widows who are truly widows” (5:3)¹², as he defines the widows

⁸ A wide overview of the citations in MASSARO 1977. GRAVERINI (2006) discusses the use of the expression in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. HEATH (2011, 84–86) overviews the citations concerning the references to ‘old wives’ mainly in the context of the mythological narratives.

⁹ Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b: ταῦτα μὲν γὰρ ἔστιν ὁ λεγόμενος γραιῶν ὕθλος

¹⁰ Chrysippus, *Fragmenta logica et physica*, 911, 155: ἀδολεσχίαν γραιωδίη and Poseidonios, *Fragmenta*, 290a, 442: μυθαρίω γραιώδει πιστεύσας.

¹¹ Πρεσβυτέρω μὴ ἐπιπλήξης, ἀλλὰ παρακάλει ὡς πατέρα, νεωτέρους ὡς ἀδελφούς, πρεσβυτέρας ὡς μητέρας, νεωτέρας ὡς ἀδελφάς ἐν πάσῃ ἀγνείᾳ.

¹² Χήρας τίμα τὰς ὄντως χήρας.

at the age of at least 60: “not less than sixty years old” (5:9)¹³. It is difficult to reconcile the negative references to the age and sex of other Christians with the teaching about the church existing in Pauline churches, which constitutes one organism whose weaker members must be protected and honoured (1 Corinthians 12:12–26)¹⁴. Despite the above, it is worth noting that one of the fundamental rules of Pauline theology was “the rule of no distinction”, which is explicitly formulated in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. The rule is reflected among others in the vital role of women in Pauline churches.¹⁵ MacDonald rightly pays attention to the social context of the Pastoral Epistles and reminds the examples of women playing significant roles in public life outside the church, also in the sphere of religion, at that time.¹⁶ All the more, it is not surprising that also in the Pauline churches, the women were involved in public teaching activities and could be even church leaders.¹⁷ With regard to the analysed expression, it must be observed that the didactic activity of women in church raised controversies also in the ecclesiastical environment of the Pastoral Letters, as evidenced by the words from 2:12–14: “But I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman”. As Witherington III observed, the words prove that in Ephesus¹⁸ must have been active some untrained and unauthorised women who aspired to carry out teaching in the

¹³ μη ἔλαττον ἐτῶν ἐξήκοντα γεγονυῖα.

¹⁴ Especially 12:24b–25: “God composed the body by giving more abundant honor to the part which lacked it, in order that there not be a division in the body, but the members would have the same concern for one another”.

¹⁵ E.g.: Romans 16:1.7; 1 Corinthians 1:11; 11:5; 16:19 etc.

¹⁶ MacDONALD 1988, 176–178.

¹⁷ e.g Lydia (Acts 16:14ff).

¹⁸ Timothy, who is the addressee of the letter, stayed in Ephesus. 1 Timothy 1:3: “Just as I urged you when I traveled to Macedonia, remain in Ephesus, so that you may instruct certain people not to teach other doctrine”.

church.¹⁹ The context suggests that it can relate the well-to-do women mentioned earlier in the letter. They manifested their high status by wealthy apparel, which is criticised by the author of the letter: "Likewise, also the women should adorn themselves in appropriate clothing, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold jewelry or pearls or expensive clothing" (2:9). These ambitious women are described as persons who are vulnerable to the deception on the part of false teachers, as was biblical Eve (2:14). Therefore, they should learn in humility before they will be allowed to teach, such as Priscilla, a woman well known in the environment of the recipients of the Pastoral Epistles (2 Timothy 4:19).²⁰

Such reconstruction of the context shows that when Paul decided to use the expression γράωδεις μῦθοι, he did not necessarily have in mind the negative stereotype of older women, but he could refer to some cases of women who taught false doctrines. As the reader is informed, they forbade entering into marriage and recommended the abstinence from some kinds of food: "who forbid marrying and insist on abstaining from foods" (4:3).²¹ MacDonald and Young²² observe the analogical phenomenon in the apocryphal 'Acts of Paul and Thecla' containing the story of a wealthy independent woman called Thecla, who renounced marriage to become an influential preacher. Although the text was written probably in Asia Minor, like the Pastoral Letters, yet it is dated to the second century, whereas 1 Timothy most likely was written about 65 CE.²³ Undoubtedly, the apocryphal text might reflect

¹⁹ WITHERINGTON III 2006, 510–525.

²⁰ WITHERINGTON III 2006, 201–202: "The issue, then, in 1 Timothy cannot be teaching per se, or women teaching per se. Nor in light of the example of Priscilla can the matter be women teaching men. The issue, rather, is untrained and unauthorized women, who need to be learning, seeking to teach and indeed to dominate men".

²¹ κωλύόντων γαμῆν, ἀπέχεσθαι βρωμάτων.

²² MacDONALD 1988, 181–183; YOUNG 1994, 14–15;118.

²³ WITHERINGTON III 2006, 176. The main points of the controversial debate about the Pauline authorship and the date of composition are presented

the actual practice, yet projecting it backwards is anachronistic. Nevertheless, bearing in mind the above observations concerning the context of the letter, the references to the later texts seem unnecessary for the argumentation²⁴ because, as was shown, it is possible to observe in the text of 1 Timothy the connections between false teachings and the controversial activity of women at the time of the composition of the letter.

Oral transmission of values in the οἶκος

Furthermore, one should not overlook the fact that the author of 1 Timothy also must have had awareness of the positive role of women in the process of the transmission of the doctrine or cultural values.²⁵ It has already been mentioned that women played significant roles in society at that time. Moreover, it can be added that the picture of older women in Greek literature is unambiguous, and one can find there also a very positive view of older people, men and women. It can be seen in Plato, who in his 'Republic' (350e; 377c) pays attention to the fact that that older men and women play a very significant cultural role as tutors of children, and passing traditional values from generation to generation. Grandmothers told their grandchildren mythological stories, and in this way, they influenced social attitudes and passed on traditional values. As HEATH (2011, 86) concludes: "Women appear to have been a great repository of traditional tales, and must have played a significant role passing along the stories (much too significant a role, according to many ancient critics of the practice)".

It is worth noting that educational activities of this kind were conducted in the space of the house (οἶκος), which was a place where women could function more freely. The observation

in AEGESON 2008, 18–31. About the attestation of the Pastoral Epistles in the early church: KNIGHT III 1992, 53–54.

²⁴ Despite this, the tendencies towards radical ascetism, as well as problems concerning the attitude toward some kinds of food, are not unknown in other Paulin communities, for example in Corinth (1 Corinthians 7–10).

²⁵ See footnote 20 about Priscilla.

is significant since the “οἶκος” (widely understood, including slaves and even clients) was a natural social base of the early church. The early church of the New Testament was functioning in a natural way as a system of house churches.²⁶ Thus, it is valid to speculate that the role of women, especially the older women, could be even more significant in this specific household space than in the world outside the church. Paul, writing about the “μῦθοι” told by them, might then refer to some influential oral teachings transmitting some elements of the religious doctrine, although in this case, the doctrine was incorrect. Given that, there are some grounds for supposing that the expression γραῶδεις μῦθοι might appear in the text somewhat in a double meaning – as a direct reference to the oral teachings of women, which yet indirectly evoked the stereotypical connotations of the untrue stories.

Oral “myths” versus written Scripture

As was observed earlier, the fact is that the unauthorised teaching activity of women in Ephesus raised controversies and polemics at various dimensions. It is worth pointing out that there seems to be a specific dimension of the polemics, namely the tension between the “myths” (oral stories) and the truth. It can be assumed that the false teachings addressed in the letter have been called “myths” not by a coincidence, and it is significant that out of only five occurrences of the word μῦθοι in the New Testament, as many as four comes from the Pastoral Letters. The “myths” stand in sharp contradiction to the truth, like in Timothy 2:4: “and they will turn away from the hearing of the truth, but will turn to myths”²⁷ or Titus 1:14: “not paying attention to Jewish myths or to commandments of

²⁶ GAJEWSKI 2013, *passim*.

²⁷ καὶ ἀπὸ μὲν τῆς ἀληθείας τὴν ἀκοὴν ἀποστρέψουσιν, ἐπὶ δὲ τοὺς μύθους ἐκτραπήσονται.

those who reject the truth"²⁸ and similarly in 1 Timothy 1:14, where reference is made to the speculations contrary to the faith.²⁹ One of the remedies to the false "mythological" teaching is the "reading". Young Timothy receives advice about correcting false teachings. One of the suggested means is the "reading" (1 Timothy 4:13: "Until I come, pay attention to the public reading, to exhortation, to teaching").³⁰ Although it is impossible to precisely determine if Paul actually had "public" reading in mind, yet it can be concluded that the opposition shows that the correct teaching of the doctrine must be based on the written text, not on oral ways of transmission. From this perspective, it seems to be significant that in 2 Timothy 2:15 the young leader of the church is praised due to his in-depth knowledge of the Scripture: "and that from childhood you have known the holy writings that are able to make you wise". The next two verses are in turn the foundation of the theological doctrine of the divine inspiration of the biblical writings: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, in order that the person of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). On the basis of the data, it can be inferred that in the Pastoral Epistles, we can perhaps observe the moment in which the authority of the written text in the teaching of the Christian doctrine emerges. The identity of the new generation of Christians, represented by young Timothy, is built not on oral "myths", which can be told by older women, but on the foundation of the truth contained in the written Scripture.

²⁸ μὴ προσέχοντες Ἰουδαϊκοῖς μύθοις καὶ ἐντολαῖς ἀνθρώπων ἀποστρεφόμενων τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

²⁹ μὴδὲ προσέχειν μύθοις καὶ γενεαλογίαις ἀπεράντοις, αἵτινες ἐκζητήσεις παρέχουσι μᾶλλον ἢ οἰκονομίαν θεοῦ τὴν ἐν πίστει

³⁰ ἕως ἔρχομαι πρόσεχε τῇ ἀναγνώσει, τῇ παρακλήσει, τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ.

Conclusion

The present paper has attempted to support the hypothesis according to which it cannot be clearly ruled out that the expression $\gamma\rho\alpha\acute{\omega}\delta\epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \mu\ddot{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\iota$ in 1 Timothy 4:7 can refer to the specific oral teachings conveyed by the older women. It has been stated that the adherents of the contrary hypothesis according to which the expression is only a contemptuous reference to the theological opponents based on the negative stereotype, should take into consideration the following points. First of all, it would stand in sharp contradiction with the passages in the letter, where Paul calls for respect toward the older women. Secondly, one can assume that the author of the letter must have had awareness not only of the negative stereotype but also the positive image of the older women in the context of the ancient society. It cannot be denied that the role of the older women in the process of transmission of cultural values was significant in the ancient Greek culture, especially in the space of the household, which was a natural environment of the early Christian church. The women played a vital role in the life of the early Christian church, where they became teachers and even leaders. Besides, the context of 1 Timothy shows that there was a connection between false teaching and the didactic activity of unauthorised women in Ephesus. The point that the $\mu\ddot{\upsilon}\theta\omicron\iota$ 1 Timothy 4:7 can denote the oral forms of teaching is reinforced by the identification of the opposition between false oral stories and the authoritative written Scripture, which becomes the base of theological truth.

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