

Teaching Authority and Authoritative Teaching An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.
1 Timothy 2:12

One of the major issues at stake in our understanding of 1 Timothy 2:12 is the relationship between “to teach” and “to exercise authority.” Do these express the same idea, so that God is forbidding a woman from authoritative teaching? Do they express two different ideas, so that God is forbidding a woman to teach at all or have any level of authority whatsoever? Or do they express overlapping ideas, so that God is prohibiting a woman from more authoritative teaching and from exercising authority with regard to the doctrine of the church?

As with all of the words in this verse, there has been much discussion of the use of *oude*¹ (translated as “or” in the NIV), which connects the two verbs in Greek.² In this discussion, two major questions have arisen: 1) does *oude* connect two positive or two negatives only or can it mix positive and negative verbal elements and 2) what is the relationship between the two verbal elements connected by *oude*?

The first question need not concern us here. I accept as correct that ‘exercising authority’ as opposed to ‘be domineering’ is the right way to understand the word ‘*authentain*’ and so see it as connecting two positive elements (which all agree is possible). It is the second question, the relationship between the two verbs denoted by *oude* that bears further comment.

The Use of *Oude* with Verbal Elements in the New Testament

In studying the use of *oude* in the New Testament where it connects two verbs,³ one instance is rather striking and provides an opportunity to understand an important way the word functioned in the New Testament.

In Hebrews 10:5-6, the author quotes Psalm 40 saying, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased; then I said, ‘Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God.’” The two lines of Hebrew poetry: “sacrifice and offering you did not desire” and “with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased” are very typical Hebrew parallelism. But what is fascinating is what the author of Hebrews does to bring these two

¹ By *oude*, I am referring to the construction *ou...oude* as well as the similar form *mē...mēde*. *Oude* and *mede* are two forms of the same word.

² See Andreas Kostenberger, “A Complex Sentence: The Syntax of 1 Timothy 2:12” in *Women in the Church*, 2nd Edition, edited by Kostenberger and Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 53-85; [Add more here]

³ For the list of these instances, as well as the argument for why examining *oude* in this way is important, see Kostenberger, “A Complex Sentence.”

parallel lines of poetry together. In verse 8 the author writes, “First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire *nor (oude)* were you pleased with them.’”

The important observation is that *oude* allows the author to express the parallelism present in Psalms in a shorthand way. “You did not desire” and “you were not pleased” are two parallels that function together in Psalm 40. The author of Hebrews chooses *oude* as the word that continues to express the parallelism between these two statements. This points to the fact that *oude* is at home in the world of Hebrew parallelism. This is easily confirmed by looking at the use of *oude* in the LXX where it is regularly used in the context of Hebrew parallelism.

Therefore it is not surprising that when New Testament authors use *oude*, it often sounds like the parallelism that is so common in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East in general.⁴ For example:

- Matthew 6:20: “Where thieves do not break in and [*oude*] steal”
- Matthew 7:6: “Do not give to dogs what is sacred [nor] throw your pearls to pigs”
- Matthew 7:18: “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and [*oude*] a bad tree cannot bear good fruit”
- Matthew 13:13: “they do not hear or [*oude*] understand”; (cf. Mark 8:17)
- Luke 6:44: “People do not pick figs from thornbushes or [*oude*] grapes from briars”
- John 14:17: “it neither sees him nor knows him”
- Romans 9:16: “the man who wills or the man who runs”⁵
- Philippians 2:16: “I did not run or labor in vain”
- Hebrews 13:5: “Never will I leave you nor forsake you.”⁶
- 1 Peter 2:22: “He committed no sin and [*oude*] no deceit was found in his mouth.”
- 1 Peter 3:14: “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled.”⁷
- 1 John 3:6: “Either seen him or knows him.”

It is not surprising that these verses show signs of Hebrew parallelism since some of these verses are actually quotes from the Old Testament (Matthew 13:13; Hebrews 13:5; 1 Peter 2:22; 3:14). Even more importantly, Hebrew parallelism is the world in which these New Testament authors existed. Their minds were shaped by this style of speaking and thinking.

The connection to Hebrew parallelism opens up the possibility that the use of *oude* in 1 Timothy 2:12 reflects the parallelism of Paul’s Jewish background.⁸ The possibility of

⁴ On the pervasive nature of parallelism in the Bible, Adele Berlin comments, “It should not surprise us that the Bible contains so much parallelism, for in the ancient near east milieu from which it emerged most formal verbal expression was parallelistic.” *Dynamics*, 140.

⁵ The NASB shows the parallelism of the two participles a little more clearly.

⁶ ESV. The NIV shows the parallelism more strongly, but it leaves the *oude* untranslated.

⁷ ESV.

parallelism in 1 Timothy 2:12 is heightened by the observation that in 1 Timothy 2, “Paul seems to have a propensity to use pairs of largely synonymous words to say just about everything important twice.”⁹ Understanding Hebrew parallelism, therefore, may be the key to understanding what Paul means with regard to teaching and exercising authority.¹⁰

In her excellent book, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Adele Berlin presents a linguistically-oriented study of Biblical parallelism. Importantly for our study of 1 Timothy 2, Berlin argues that parallelism is a mark of the biblical style as a whole and can be found in prose as well as poetry, although it is more predominant in poetry. By coming at parallelism from a linguistic point of view, Berlin helps us to see that it can occur in smaller segments like words and phrases.

With regard to parallelism between words, Berlin argues that parallel ideas in the author’s mind activate the parallel words that are used through word association. While these can be somewhat fixed word pairs (like man-woman, or silver-gold) they can also come out of conceptual ideas that are parallel in the mind of the author. They do not have to be fixed parallels documented in the extant literature. Recognizing this, it becomes the task of the interpreter to “see how a given author or verse uses a specific pair for his own purpose – to create his own emphasis or meaning.”¹¹ This is important because while “teaching” and “authority” may not be fixed parallels, they are clearly connected to each other in Paul.

Berlin then identifies the main semantic function of parallelism: disambiguation and ambiguity. One of the purposes of the second element in a pair is to make clear the first; it “directs the interpretation.”¹² But there is another role for the second element in the pair. It “may introduce an element of ambiguity into the first. The first line takes on a new shade of meaning when it is read in terms of the second.”¹³ Importantly, she points out that, “both

⁸ It has long been noted that Hebrew parallelism is a feature of Paul’s style of writing. E.g. Moulton and Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek: Vol. 4 – Style* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 96-97.

⁹ Craig Blomberg, “Women in Ministry: A Complementarian Perspective” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 169. His examples are in verses 1, 2a, 2b, 3, 4, 7a, 7b, 8, 9, and 11.

¹⁰ Linda Belleville comments that *oude* is a “poetic device that normally sets in parallel two or more natural groupings of words, phrases or clauses.” She then goes on to list different categories of usage and then opts for “purpose” as the function in 1 Timothy 2:12. But a better understanding of parallelism is needed in order to understand what Paul is saying. “Women in Ministry: An Egalitarian Perspective” in *Two Views on Women in Ministry*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 98.

¹¹ Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Revised and Expanded (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 79.

¹² *Dynamics*, 96.

¹³ *Dynamics*, 97.

disambiguation and ambiguity coexist in parallelism.”¹⁴ “A parallel line does both; it insures the delivery of the information in the first line and, even in the context of that first line, it encourages a second view of things, as alternate interpretation. Redundancy and ambiguity (disambiguation and polysemy) are locked in eternal struggle in parallelism. To choose one is to lose the other, and thereby lose the major dialectic tension of parallelism...Like human vision it superimposes two slightly different views on the same object and from their convergence it produces a sense of depth.”¹⁵

Looking at other uses of *oude* in the New Testament, we can see examples of how this might function.

Matthew 10:14: “If anyone will not welcome you or [*mēde*] listen to your words leave that home or [*ē*] town and shake the dust off your feet.” The difference between *mēde* and *ē* is clear here. With *ē* there is no interplay between “home” and “town.” The home may be in the town, but the word “home” doesn’t interpret town nor “town” interpret “home.” It is different with “welcome you” and “listen to your words.” If someone is extremely hospitable to a visiting disciple sharing food and their home with them but won’t listen to their teaching about the kingdom of God that’s not what Jesus has in mind. Likewise someone who is willing to hear what the apostles are saying but not welcome them into their lives is not what Jesus has in mind. The meaning comes in the interplay between “welcome” and “listen”

Or consider Acts 16:21: “These men are Jews and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or [*oude*] practice.” There are some ritualistic religious practices that are not really accepted as having any real value, and there are some things that can be intellectually accepted but don’t really affect what people do. But here the complaint lodged against Paul and Silas is at the intersection of the two: things that are accepted and practiced. In other words, those who are complaining are saying that Paul and Silas are presenting a fundamentally different approach to life.

Finally, 1 Timothy 6:17: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant or [*mēde*] put their hope in wealth.” Arrogance is a broad idea but its interpretation is constrained by “put their hope in wealth.” Paul’s concern is not simply boasting about how much money one has. Rather it is arrogantly thinking that money will solve all problems. Likewise putting one’s hope in something doesn’t automatically signal arrogance, but in this construction it is that aspect of putting one’s hope in something is being emphasized.

This is what *oude* represents: the dynamic interplay between two elements that mutually interpret one another.

Oude in 1 Timothy 2:12

Applying these insights on Hebrew parallelism and *oude* to 1 Timothy 2:12 means that “to teach” and “to have authority” mutually interpret one another.¹⁶ This means that they are

¹⁴ *Dynamics*, 97.

¹⁵ *Dynamics*, 99.

¹⁶ This is in contrast to the claim of Doug Moo who says, “While the word in question, *oude* (‘and not,’ ‘neither,’ ‘nor’), certainly usually joins ‘two closely related items,’ it does not

not two completely separate activities, nor are they exactly identical with each other. Rather, it means that you cannot read the prohibition against teaching except in light of the prohibition on authority and vice versa. Only in the interplay between the two does the meaning come to the surface.

For this reason, it is unlikely that Paul is forbidding every form of teaching activity by women in the church. That might be the interpretation if the parallel idea of exercising authority were not present. But its presence helps us to understand teaching as that kind of teaching that is connected to the exercise of authority. For example we are told that Jesus taught with authority (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32; John 7:25) and he was questioned by what authority he was teaching and doing such things (Matthew 21:23; cf. John 14:10). Paul was given authority for building up the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 10:8), which included, among other things, both the letters that he wrote to them and the teaching that he did among them. Titus is told that he should teach, encourage and rebuke with all authority (Titus 2:15).¹⁷ This represents the kind of public, authoritative teaching, which should be differentiated from the mutual instruction we all receive from each other.¹⁸

For this reason, it is also unlikely that Paul is forbidding every form of exercising authority. Rather, what is in mind is the kind of public exercise of authority over teaching, in relation to teaching, or that can happen through teaching. This connection between authority and its exercise in relation to teaching seems to be the connection that Paul is drawing with the story of Adam and Eve in 1 Timothy 2:13-14. Eve was deceived by Satan who tricked her into exercising authority over the instructions communicated to her through Adam.¹⁹ The point of Eve's deception is not that Satan tricked her into ordering Adam around but it comes in relation to the instructions about eating the fruit of the tree. Satan deceived Eve into exercising authority over the instructions from God so that she essentially declared them null and void.

Likewise, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, though a very difficult text to understand, seems best as taken as a prohibition of women exercising public authority in evaluating the prophecies presented in the worshipping assembly.

usually join words that restate the same thing or that are mutually interpreting, and sometimes it joins opposites." Doug Moo, "What Does It Mean Not to Teach or Have Authority Over Men?" in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, edited by Piper and Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 187.

¹⁷ See discussion of this verse in Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 766-767.

¹⁸ The fact that teaching that is connected to authority is in mind here can be seen in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 where Paul is concerned that women who are prophesying in church might be seen to be teaching with their own authority and therefore some sign is necessary to show that this is not what they are doing.

¹⁹ On the view that what is going on in these verses is related to the issue of male headship, see Tom Schreiner, "An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-15" in *Women and the Church*, 111-115.

Priscilla and Aquila taking Apollos aside to instruct him (Acts 18) seems to fit with this pattern of women not exercising authority with regard to the proclamation of the word. By taking him aside and instructing him in private, not only were they being kind, but this also doesn't seem in any way to violate teaching with authority nor exercising authority with regard to teaching. Priscilla's involvement in Apollos' education means that Paul is not prohibiting women from instructing and correcting.

So "to teach" and "to exercise authority" cannot be read separately but only together.

Conclusion

In 1 Timothy 2:12 "to teach" and "to exercise authority" form a mutually interpreting pair of instructions. Reading them as separate injunctions does not do justice to the Greek word, *oude*, that Paul has used to connect them. Likewise one cannot simply be subordinated under the other. Rather they must stand together. In this dialectical interplay there is room for disagreement and discussion about how and when teaching and authority interact.

Practically speaking, 1 Timothy 2:12 is not talking about the situation where a woman participates in the worship service, perhaps through prayer, reading scripture or sharing a testimony, and men learn something about the nature and character of God. Nor, do I think, it is talking about a woman teaching men in a mixed-gender Bible study. I don't think it is prohibiting a woman from teaching joint training meetings of men and women, similar to Calvary's Leadership Development Forum. Nor is it talking about men reporting to women on a pastoral staff or women running committees comprised of men and women. It does not prohibit a woman from leading the church in worship, or advising the elders on various policies.

In a church setting, this passage does appear to prohibit women from exercising authority over the church's teaching/preaching ministry (such as being an elder or responsible for the authoritative evaluation of prophecy), and from teaching/preaching with independent authority. Amidst this prohibition, the most important thing to remember is within the dynamic interplay between "to teach" and "to exercise authority," there are some gray areas, especially as it is worked out in various church contexts, but God has provided His Spirit to guide and direct us.