

**“Vessel (*skeuos*)” in 1 Thessalonians 4.4 and the Epistle of Jeremiah: The Strategy of a Pauline Metaphor in Light of the Apostle’s Jewish Background, Teaching, and Theology.**

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**ABSTRACT:**

There are few exegetical enigmas in the New Testament more debated and discussed than the battle over the meaning of *skeuos* in 1 Thessalonians 4.4. In this article we will investigate a close lexical parallel in the Epistle of Jeremiah to determine how this Hellenistic Jewish text might illuminate Paul’s argument. Based on this comparison, we will propose that Paul is referring to the believer’s body using a traditional Jewish critique of idolatry that also commonly employs the term *skeuos*. Such an interpretation has the potential to open up this important text and tie it more closely to a recognized pattern of argumentation and paraenesis found in Paul’s letters more widely.

### **1. Introduction and History of Interpretation**

Interpreters of Paul’s letters are aware that those complex and thorny passages of his that elude perspicuity spark some of the most lively discussions and encourage serious exegetical acuity as his work and thought are explored. One particular verse, 1 Thessalonians 4.4, has generated engagement after engagement in hopes of solving the mystery of the clause ‘εἰδέναι ἕκαστον ὑμῶν τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκευός κτᾶσθαι’. The RSV translates this ‘that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself’; the NRSV, ‘that each one of you know how to control your own body’.<sup>1</sup> What accounts for the very

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<sup>1</sup> Those preferring the ‘wife’ interpretation include Theodore of Mopsuestia; Augustine; J.E. Frame, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* (New York: Scribner’s, 1912); R.F. Collins, *Studies on the First Letter to the Thessalonians* (BETL 66; Leuven: University Press, 1984); N. Baumert, ‘Brautwerbung—das einheitliche Thema von 1 Thess 4,3-8’, in *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (ed. R. Collins; Leuven: University Press, 1990), 316-39; A. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 226. The ‘body’ view is advocated by Tertullian; Chrysostom; B. Rigaux, *Les épîtres aux Thessaloniens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1956); F.F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*

translations and meanings of this verse is the understanding of the two words *σκευος* and *κτάομαι* and, most importantly, how they relate to one another in a meaningful way. The former word, *σκευος*, literally means ‘vessel’, but is employed as a metaphor in this instance. Observing other occasions where Paul uses the word *σκευος* symbolically (2 Cor 4.7; Rom 9.21-23; 2 Tim 2.20-1<sup>2</sup>), one would naturally be led to associate it with a person as a whole, or as a functional equivalent to *σώμα*. What hinders simply carrying on this assumption is the meaning of the verb *κτάομαι*. Scholars recognize that the present tense of the verb (which we have in 1 Thess 4.4) is best understood ingressively as ‘to acquire’ or ‘to obtain’.<sup>3</sup> In some instances, we find *κτάομαι* used in combination with *γυνή* to mean ‘to acquire a wife’ (see Ruth 4.5, 10; Sir 36.24).<sup>4</sup> In such a case, Paul would be forming a ‘hybrid expression’<sup>5</sup> by substituting *σκευος* for *γυνή*. Other evidence is marshaled to defend the interpretation of *σκευος* as wife. In particular, in 1 Peter 3.7 husbands are commanded to be considerate to their wife as the ‘weaker vessel (*ἀσθενεστέρῳ σκεύει*)’.<sup>6</sup> However, as many have

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(WBC 45; Waco: Word, 1982); M. McGehee, ‘A Rejoinder to Two Recent Studies Dealing With 1 Thessalonians 4:4’, *CBQ* 51 (1989): 82-89; E. Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> There are a number of interesting verbal and thematic parallels between 2 Tim 2.21 and 1 Thess 4.4 that have been largely ignored by scholars most likely because of the former’s alleged pseudonymity. However, in both passages we find a distinct confluence of the language of vessels, honor, and holiness, as well as lust/passions (*ἐπιθυμία* in both 1 Thess 4.5 and 2 Tim 2.22).

<sup>3</sup> See LXX Deut 28.68; 2 Sam 24.24; Amos 8.6; Ezek 7.12; Acts 8.20; see BAGD 455; LSJ 1001; Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 226.

<sup>4</sup> See R.F. Collins, *Studies*, 313.

<sup>5</sup> J.E. Smith, ‘1 Thessalonians 4:4: Breaking the Impasse’, *BBR* (2001), 69.

<sup>6</sup> C. Maurer goes as far as stating that 1 Pet 3.7 is influenced directly by Paul’s statement in 1 Thess 4.4; see *TDNT* 7.367; also H. Binder, ‘Paulus and Die Thessalonicherbrief’, in *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (ed. R.F. Collins; BETL 87; Leuven: University Press, 1990), 87-93.

noted, here the implication of the comparative form of ἄσθενής is that both husband *and* wife are vessels.<sup>7</sup>

Another line of argumentation that favors the view of vessel as wife is an appeal to ‘Jewish traditions’, particularly language found in rabbinic sources (see, e.g., *B.Meg.* 12b).<sup>8</sup> However, drawing conclusions from later sources and that were written in Hebrew rather than Greek is a risky interpretative move, let alone the implications of such a low view of marriage in Paul’s discourse ‘as though [the wife’s] *raison d’être* were to provide a means by which her husband might satisfy his sexual appetite’.<sup>9</sup>

It is partly on the basis of the above concerns for the interpretation of vessel-as-wife that many have opted to regard it as simply referring to the body. This translation often takes κτᾶσθαι in a durative way, but Smith persuasively argues that a sufficient number of examples exist with this force in ‘nonperfect forms’ (including Prov 1.14; P.Tebt. 1.15.241-43; Aesop *Fab.* 289; Philo *Mos* 1.160; Luke 18.12;<sup>10</sup> Josephus *Ant* 5.1.16 §54).<sup>11</sup> Finally, taking vessel to refer generically to ‘body’ would support the notion that the passage is referring to any and all believers, rather than just men or unmarried men.<sup>12</sup>

Malherbe, a recent proponent of the vessel-as-wife view, ultimately is unconvinced of the ‘body’ interpretation because of the ‘natural ingressive’ meaning of κτᾶσθαι. A second problem for him is the

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 83; P.J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 217.

<sup>8</sup> This kind of rabbinic evidence is put forth by O.L. Yarbrough, *Not Like the Gentiles: Marriage Rules in the Letters of Paul* (SBLDS 80; Atlanta: Scholars, 1984), 72-3.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, *Thessalonians*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 18.12: ‘I give tithes on all that κτᾶμαι’; note that the Vulgate translates this as ‘*possideo*’.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, ‘Impasse’, 84-5.

<sup>12</sup> See a similar critique in McGehee, ‘Rejoinder’, 82-89; Smith, ‘Impasse’, 80-81.

appearance of ‘ἐαυτοῦ’ which Malherbe finds nonsensical if σκευός is taken to mean body.<sup>13</sup> But one could easily reach the opposite conclusion as one would expect the dative pronoun if the meaning is ‘acquire a wife *for* himself’.<sup>14</sup> In the end, this is a non-issue when it is observed that ἐαυτοῦ is used of *both* ‘wife’ *and* ‘body’ in Ephesians 5.28a: ‘In the same way, husbands should love their wife (τὰς ἐαυτῶν γυναῖκας) as they do their own bodies (τὰ ἐαυτῶν σώματα)’. The problem is further blunted by the probability that by this time ‘in Hellenistic Greek the pronoun has lost much of its emphatic force’.<sup>15</sup>

Though Smith intended to ‘break the impasse’ with his article on the issue, many scholars have opted for an agnostic approach that recognizes what Rigaux stated more than half a century ago: we do not possess enough information to ‘resolve the crosses’ on this matter.<sup>16</sup> In a recent overview of this interpretive enigma, Todd Still highlights the assumptions, presuppositions, and preferences for particular kinds of evidence that often lead scholars to one conclusion or another.<sup>17</sup> Based on the analyses and critiques of Still, Smith, and McGehee, several issues are essential for discerning the meaning of Paul’s words in 1 Thessalonians 4.4: (1) relating σκευός and κτᾶσθαι with special attention to the closest verbal and thematic parallels in contemporary literature, (2) a reading that attempts to account for the former ‘instructions (παραγγελίας)’ mentioned in 4.2,

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<sup>13</sup> Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 227.

<sup>14</sup> This argument is made by Smith, ‘Impasse’, 79.

<sup>15</sup> G.P. Carras, ‘Jewish Ethics and Gentile Converts: Remarks on 1 Thes 4,3-8’, in R.F. Collins (ed.), *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (BETL 87; Leuven: University Press), 309.

<sup>16</sup> Rigaux, *Thessaloniciens*, 503, as cited in Collins, *Studies*, 299. This same sentiment is expressed by B. Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1998), 53.

<sup>17</sup> T. Still, ‘Interpretive Ambiguities and Scholarly Proclivities in Pauline Studies: A Treatment of Three Texts from 1 Thessalonians 4 as a Test Case’, *Currents in Biblical Research* 5.2 (2007): 207-19; note especially 213-15.

(3) a distinct connection with the issues of both consecration/sanctification (ἀγιασμός) and sexual immorality (πορνεία), and (4) an accounting for the rhetorical flow of thought in 4.3-8.

## 2. The 'Body' Argument: A New Defense

If it has not been sufficiently clear that my preference is for the vessel-as-body interpretation, I wish here not only to defend it, but to extend the argument in light of what is probably the most enlightening verbal parallel. Some scholars have chosen to rely on how either σκευός *or* κτᾶσθαι is understood, with the vessel-as-body contingency relying on the former's usage, and the vessel-as-wife contingency on the latter, in general. But what has not been accounted for is in what sense these words are understood *together*. I have been only able to uncover one relevant text in which these words are brought together in a single idea, Epistle of Jeremiah 58:

So it is better to be a king who shows his courage, or a vessel (σκευός) in a house useful to the possessor (ὁ κεκτημένος) who uses it, than to be these false gods; better even the door of a house that protects its contents, than these false gods; better also a wooden pillar in a palace, than these false gods.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of a letter that is bent on criticizing the worship and dedication to idols, a main point of this author is that a false god fails in its sole purpose of being profitable to the one who possesses it. In a sense, it is better even to make a simple drinking cup than an idol because at least it will provide some service! Similar arguments against idolatry are found in a number of Jewish texts as the Epistle of Jeremiah is supposedly based on the polemic of Jeremiah 10 (see also Deut 4.27-8; Isa 40.18-20; 44.9-20; 46.1-7; Ps 115.4-8; 135.15-18). It would have been a particularly meaningful choice to speak of

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<sup>18</sup> All translations of ancient texts (including NT) are my own unless otherwise noted.

a household 'vessel', because such critical texts related idols to 'vessels' as well (e.g., Wis 15.13). Having a strong influence from Pharisaic Judaism, Paul would have undoubtedly been familiar with standard Jewish arguments against idolatry, as the Epistle of Jeremiah more closely represents language meant to prevent Jews from being tempted to worship idols and this perhaps found a place in the teaching of the synagogue. Indeed, based on clues in 1 Thessalonians itself, we can be fairly certain that Paul indeed *did* present such arguments to Gentiles who 'turned from idols to serve the living and true God' (1.9a).<sup>19</sup> But what could this combination of κεῦος and κτᾶσθαι mean in such a context?

If it was not uncommon for Jews to compare idols to 'vessels' that are empty and offer no use to their 'possessor', perhaps Paul was re-applying this analogy to the Thessalonians themselves. Paul's message, then, would be, *your body is a vessel that, when controlled, can bring honor to God. However, if you dishonor your 'vessel', it will become as useless and as empty as an idol!* Certainly this transference of cultic/idol imagery accords with other Pauline exhortations. In 1 Corinthians 5, applying elements of the Passover rites to his readers in a unique way, Paul urges them to expel the immoral brother because they are new lumps of unleavened dough (v.7). An exegetical analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4.1-8 will be able to flesh out the dynamics of this interpretation and offer potential clues as to how to understand Paul's flow of thought in this important hortatory passage.

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Bonington ('Fleeing idolatry: Social Embodiment of Anti-Idolatry in the First Century', in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism, and Christianity* [ed. S.C. Barton; London: T & T Clark, 2007], 108) observes that, though the early church did not maintain Jewish standards (overall) of circumcision, dietary regulations, and festal observances, it was very much in agreement with Jewish tradition and practice on the matter of the abhorrence of idolatry; see also P.J. Achtemeier, 'Gods Made with Hands: The New Testament and the Problem of Idolatry', *Ex Auditu* 44 (1999): 43-62.

### 3. An Exegetical Analysis of 1 Thessalonians 4.1-8

Chapter four commences the *probatio* (4.1-5.22) and exhorts the readers to pursue an ongoing commitment to what they had already learned. Paul begins with a friendly and collegial tone by referring to them as ‘brothers’ and employing the verb ἐρωτάω.<sup>20</sup> However, he immediately makes reference to the prior instructions given to them about how they ought to ‘live and to please God’ (4.1). In some sense, then, the Thessalonians received traditional teaching about morality and right-living that characterized them as Christ followers and distinguished them from pagans.<sup>21</sup> It should be recognized, though, that clear bifurcations between one kind of teaching (i.e. ‘kerygmatic’) and another (i.e. ‘ethical’) may be too artificial since it would appear that Paul often based both on the life and death of Christ and the history of Israel.<sup>22</sup>

It has also been argued by a number of scholars that Paul’s language of tradition and former instruction has a particularly *Jewish* character that includes a number of literary features that were found in rabbinic schools such as παρελάβετε (reflecting *masar-qibbel*) and περιπατεῖν (reflecting *halakah*).<sup>23</sup> In fact, R. Collins labels all of 1 Thessalonians with a ‘Jewish quality which pervades the entire first letter to the Thessalonians’.<sup>24</sup> K.K. Yeo acknowledges this but puzzles over why Paul would employ Jewish materials and

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<sup>20</sup> See Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 218-19.

<sup>21</sup> J.D.G. Dunn classifies this reference to traditional teaching under the rubric of ‘ethical tradition’, the most common category of Paul’s usage of tradition-language (see *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* [London: SCM, 1977], 68).

<sup>22</sup> See particularly 1 Thess 2.11-13; 1 Cor 10.1-8; also J. Plevnik, ‘Pauline Presuppositions’, in *Thessalonian Correspondence* (ed. R. Collins; Leuven: University Press, 1990), 50-61; Dunn, *Unity*, 60-76.

<sup>23</sup> See Collins, *Studies*, 43; Carras, ‘Jewish Ethics’, 306-7; Weima, ‘Holiness’, 102-3.

<sup>24</sup> Collins, *Studies*, 315.

puzzles over why Paul would employ Jewish materials and arguments to Gentile readers.<sup>25</sup> However, Carras has correctly explained that on the matters of certain religious and social issues such as sexual deviance and idolatry, Paul could draw from standard Jewish moral exhortation, which would also have been familiar to what may have been an even small minority of the Thessalonians that had previous ties to the synagogue.<sup>26</sup>

Paul, in verse three, explicates the grounds for his ethical instructions: ‘This is the will of God, your sanctification (ἀγιασμός)’ (4.3a). Earlier, in 3.11-12, holiness (ἀγιωσύνη) was further defined in regards to unity and an abundance of love within the community, whereas here it was more precisely related to separation (ἀπέχσθαι) from sexual immorality (4.3b). That Paul would single out this particular ‘vice’ as the ultimate barrier to sanctification should not be surprising.

The reason for this abhorrence [of sexual immorality in Judaism] is twofold. First, for the Jew, participation in any form of sexual immorality was tantamount to forsaking the holy God, who demanded separation from all forms of sexual immorality and impurity. Closely associated with this was the persistent belief that non-Jews were guilty of sexual immorality and that this was the direct result of their idolatry.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> ‘The Rhetoric of Election’, in *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible* (eds. S. Porter and D. Stamps; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 536n.40.

<sup>26</sup> Carras, ‘Jewish Ethics’, 314-5.

<sup>27</sup> Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 150; see also J. Marcus, ‘Idolatry in the New Testament’, *Interpretation* 60.2 (2006): 154-5. Note that, after a recounting of the paradigmatic sinful history of Israel in 1 Corinthians 10.1-4, Paul encourages his readers not to lust (‘ἐπεθύμησαν’) after evil things (10.6), engage in sexual immorality (‘πορνεύωμεν’; 10.8), nor worship idols (‘εἰδωλολάτραι’; 10.7; ‘φεύγετε ἀπὸ τῆς εἰδωλολατρίας’; 10.14). The correlation between idolatry and sexuality is explored from a sociological and cosmological perspective by S.C. Barton (influenced by Mary Douglas)

Wanamaker's reading of Jewish abhorrence of sexual immorality and its relationship to idolatry is accurate in light of such thoughts as expressed in Wis 14.12: 'For the idea of making idols was the beginning of sexual immorality (πορνείας), and the invention of them was the corruption of life'.<sup>28</sup> It is also relevant to observe that two of the three primary requirements for the Gentile believers set by the Jerusalem decree were abstinence from the 'pollution' of idolatry and sexual immorality ('τοῦ ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων καὶ τῆς πορνείας'; Acts 15.20, 29; 21.25).<sup>29</sup> Silvanus' involvement in the writing of the Thessalonian epistles and his presence at the Jerusalem council (along with Paul) increases the likelihood that 'Paul had included the decree as part of the moral instruction delivered to the new believers in Thessalonica'.<sup>30</sup>

A further explication of how to be obedient unto sanctification and to eschew sexual immorality involves applied knowledge. Each believer is responsible for knowing 'τὸ ἑαυτοῦ σκεῦος κτᾶσθαι' (4.4a). The verb κτᾶομαι normally has an ingressive aspect, as noted above. Thus, many scholars are led to believe that since one cannot 'acquire' one's own body, then σκεῦος must mean something else.<sup>31</sup> However, though there are some instances where κτᾶομαι is best understood duratively, there may be a way to retain an ingressive sense while still interpreting σκεῦος as 'body'. It may be best to understand κτᾶσθαι not as an acquisition, but a *re-acquisition* or *re-possession*. This image of continually re-mastering oneself is found in another of his discussions of self-control in 1 Corinthians where he constantly subdues and dominates his body (9.27). Thus, the tense of the verb itself should not preclude reading σκεῦος as body.

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the Connection?', *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism, and Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 141-62.

<sup>28</sup> See also *T.Benj.* 10.10; *3 Bar* 8.5; 13.4; *T.Reub.* 4.6.

<sup>29</sup> Observe, also, that the language of conversion found in the council setting of Acts ('ἐπιστρέφουσιν ἐπὶ τὸν θεόν'; 15.19) parallels Paul's same kind of language in 1 Thessalonians 1.9 ('ἐπεστρέψατε πρὸς τὸν θεόν').

<sup>30</sup> Green, *Thessalonians*, 190.

<sup>31</sup> This is, perhaps, Malherbe's (*Thessalonians*, 227) primary concern with the 'body' interpretation.

in another of his discussions of self-control in 1 Corinthians where he constantly subdues and dominates his body (9.27). Thus, the tense of the verb itself should not preclude reading *σκευος* as body. The text from the Epistle of Jeremiah (v. 58) to which we have compared Paul's language contrasts a useful 'vessel' to a worthless idol. This 'vessel' is profitable to the 'κεκτημένος', 'the one having taken possession of it', i.e., its owner. If the Thessalonians had problems involving sexual sin, as several scholars suggest,<sup>32</sup> Paul may have purposely been communicating that they had virtually lost possession of their bodies (as 'masters') and needed to *re-gain* it. They, in a sense, would be as worthless as idols (who offer nothing to their possessors) if they committed sexual immorality. Is there any historical comparison between an idol and humans who become like idols from which Paul could draw? Certainly this thinking appears in the critiques of idolatry found in the Psalms.

Their idols are...the work of mortal hands...Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them (Ps 115.4, 8; cf. Ps 135.15, 18).<sup>33</sup>

In Paul this is prominent in Rom 1.21 where the wicked became worthless ('*ἐματαιώθησαν*') in their thinking. This language parallels LXX Jer 2.5 where Israel is said to have 'followed worthless things (*ματαιών*) and have become worthless (*ἐματαιώθησαν*)' – a text that clearly is referring to idol worship (see Jer 2.8).<sup>34</sup>

This interpretation accords with the most natural reading of *σκευος* which metaphorically refers to the individual person as a tool, instrument, or vessel. This resonates with Pauline usage in the

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<sup>32</sup> See Wanamaker, *Thessalonians*, 150; Weima, 'Holiness', 98.

<sup>33</sup> For an in-depth appraisal of this phenomenon, see E. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart: A Study in Biblical Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); see also G. Fee, *Pauline Christology* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson), 383.

<sup>34</sup> Meadors, *Idolatry*, 105-115.

potter/vessel discourse of Romans 9.21-23<sup>35</sup> and the image of the fragile clay jars in 2 Corinthians 4.7. An apt parallel text from the New Testament, though, that has not been brought into the discussion of 1 Thessalonians 4.4 is Acts 9.15 where Luke recounts the discourse between the Lord and Ananias: ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel (σκεῦος) for me in order to bring my name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel’. The essence of Paul’s being a ‘vessel’ in this case is the carrying of the name of the Lord. It is probably no coincidence, then, that just two verses later this human gospel-vessel is filled with the Holy Spirit (9.17; cf. the discussion of 1 Thess 4.8 below).

The particular manner in which the Thessalonians are to possess their body is in ‘holiness and honor’ (ἐν ἀγιασμῷ καὶ τιμῇ; 4.4b). This is meant to reinforce the general encouragement to pursue holiness, but the pairing of this idea with ‘honor’ is quite rare in Paul and finds its closest parallel in 2 Timothy 2.20-1:

In a large house there are vessels (σκεῦη) not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use (τιμῆν), some for ordinary (ἄτιμίαν). All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned will become vessels for honorable use (σκεῦος εἰς τιμῆν), consecrated (ἡγιασμένον) and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work.

In a manner similar to 1 Thessalonians 4.4, this passage takes the image of a simple vessel and applies it to the life of a believer and notes the importance of function (honorable) and status (holy/consecrated). What is even more interesting is that this text in 2 Timothy also has strong verbal and thematic resonances with the Epistle of Jeremiah which merit consideration.

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<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that Meadors views this passage and the prophetic ‘potter’ texts to which it alludes as framed within the context of ‘God’s dealing with idolatrous Israel’ (*Idolatry*, 130-33).

Gods made of wood and overlaid with **silver** and **gold** are unable to save themselves from thieves or robbers. Anyone who can will strip them of their **gold** and **silver** and of the robes they wear, and go off with this booty, and they will not be able to help themselves. So it is better to be a king who shows his courage, or a **vessel** (σκεῦος) in a **house** that serves (χρήσεται) its owner's (ὁ κεκτημένος) **need** (χρήσιμον), than to be these false gods; better even the door of a house that protects its contents, than these false gods; better also a **wooden** pillar in a palace, than these false gods (Ep Jer 57-9).

In a large **house** there are **vessels** (σκεῦη) not only of **gold** and **silver** but also of **wood** and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned will become special **vessels** (σκεῦος), dedicated and **useful** (ἔχρηστων) to the **owner** (δὲσπότη) of the **house**, ready for every good work (2 Tim 2.20-1).

Though there is not enough evidence to determine it, this New Testament passage may also be relying on this traditional language of idol critique. Looking, then, at how a vessel is dealt with in a way that attends 'holiness and honor' (1 Thess 4.4), there is a distinct interest in purification and attentiveness to the master's purpose.

A further qualification of Paul's focus on consecration is found in 4.5 where 'lustful passion' (πάθει ἐπιθυμίας) is a standard feature of pagans who do not know God. Malherbe points to a similar Christian tradition of relating lust ('ἐπιθυμίας'; 1 Pet 1.14) to ignorance ('ἄγνοία'; 1.14) and idolatry.<sup>36</sup> One could also point to Galatians 4.8-9: 'Formerly, when you did not know God (οὐκ εἰδότες

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<sup>36</sup> 1 Peter refers to their former life as one of 'ματαιάς' – the same kind of 'emptiness' that appears in contexts of idol critique (See, e.g., Wis 15.8; Isa 44.9; Jer 10.15; 51.18; cf. Acts 14.15).

θεόν), you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again (ἐπιστρέφετε) to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? (NRSV)'. The language Paul uses here in Galatians of 'turning back' would be, in a sense, retroversion to a former religious way of life. The same verb (ἐπιστρέφω) is used in 1 Thessalonians 1.9 of the Thessalonians' turning from idols to the true God, standard language of Jewish hostility and propaganda against the worship of false gods.<sup>37</sup>

Paul's next statement in 4.6 refers to the purpose of his primary command for the mastering of the 'vessel', namely, that no one's rights should be violated.<sup>38</sup> The theme of the Lord-as-avenger also appears in 2 Thessalonians 1.8 where, though the primary interest is in those who persecute the believers in Thessalonica, the objects of God's justice are those who 'do not know God (μὴ εἰδόσιν θεόν)'. Again it is reinforced that sexual immorality and idolatry (or ignorance of the true God) are closely linked.

For Paul, sexual immorality (often in partnership with or as a result of idolatry) naturally led to moral and ritual impurity (ἀκαθαρσία; 1 Thess 4.7). This impurity was the status of those who worshipped idols in Romans 1 (cf. 1.24), and in Colossians 3.5 where sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and sexual greed<sup>39</sup> are called 'idolatry (εἰδωλολατρία)'. The seriousness of Paul's injunction towards consecration is revealed in 1 Thessalonians 4.8 where the one who rejects his teaching is disregarding, not a mortal, but God himself. But why should he be so insistent that this God is

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<sup>37</sup> See Gaventa, *Thessalonians*, 19; Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 119-20.

<sup>38</sup> That this verse is a continuation of the issue of sexual immorality is persuasively argued by Collins, *Studies*, 333-35; see also D. Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995), 83.

<sup>39</sup> The word 'πλεονεξίαν' means 'greed' in a general sense, but the context suggests a sexual connotation; see James D.G. Dunn, *Colossians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 215-6.

the one who ‘gives his Holy Spirit’? Certainly there is some relationship to Spirit-possession and authority (see John 3.34). However, Paul’s later thoughts on sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 6 are instructive:

‘...anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun sexual immorality! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the sexually immoral person sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body’ (6.17-20).

It is likely that Paul’s mentioning of the Holy Spirit’s endowment in 1 Thessalonians 4.8 also refers to the presence of God within the life of the community and the body of each person. There may, though, be even more to it than that. In 2 Corinthians the believers are, once again, called the ‘temple of the living God’, and Paul poses the poignant rhetorical question, ‘What agreement has the temple of God with idols?’ (2 Cor 6.16).<sup>40</sup> This juxtaposition ends a series of oppositions (light/darkness, Christ/Beliar, believer/unbeliever) and climaxes with the contrasting of the *true* temple with *false* idols. If the earlier items follow the pattern of juxtaposing ‘balanced

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<sup>40</sup> Though some are convinced that this passage (2 Cor 6.14-7.1) is alien to Paul and to 2 Corinthians, we have yet to find a manuscript of the epistle that omits this passage or even relocates it. Additionally, arguments from ‘unique vocabulary’ are specious as even an uncontested passage such as 1 Cor 4.7-13 also contains a number of *hapax legomena*; see P. Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 317; also D.A. deSilva, ‘Recasting the Moment of Decision: 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 in Its Literary Context’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 31 (1993): 3-16; J. Lambrecht, ‘The Fragment 2 Cor vi 14-vii 1: A Plea for Authenticity’, *Miscellanea Neotestamentica II* (eds. T. Baarda, A.F.J. Klijn, W.C. van Unnik; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 531-49; J. Murphy-O’Connor, ‘Relating 2 Corinthians 6.14-7.1 to its Context’, *NTS* 33 (1987): 272-75; W.J. Webb, *Returning Home: New Covenant and Second Exodus as the Context for 2 Corinthians 6.14-7.1* (Sheffield, JSOT Press: 1993).

opposites' or their 'exact antithesis',<sup>41</sup> in some way there is a category into which 'temple' and 'idol' fit.<sup>42</sup> What, then, is the rubric for this final statement? In a sense, the most general concept is that both items *supposedly* contain the presence of a deity.<sup>43</sup> But, as the Corinthians are told that *they are* in fact the temple of the living God, this implies the presence of God through his Spirit – a point made more than once in 1 Corinthians (3.16; 6.19). The implication of this would be that they are a temple of God that contains his Spirit, and that they are *not* like an idol (anymore) that would have no divine presence. It is probably not a coincidence that Paul focuses on this community-temple having πνεῦμα (i.e. 'the Holy Spirit') when it was a standard critique of idols that they possess no πνεῦμα (i.e. 'breath'; see Ps 135.17; Jer 10.14; 51.17; Hab 2.19; Ep Jer 25; cf. Rev 13.15).

That this Spirit/breath imagery is relevant to the idea of the human 'vessel' in 1 Thessalonians 4.1-8 can be supported in a number of ways. Aside from the fact that Paul's language of Spirit-reception (4.8) comes just four verses after his 'vessel' statement (4.4), one can observe a similar phenomenon in Acts 9. In 9.15, as noted above, Paul is chosen as the Lord's σκεῦος to bear his 'name' to the Gentiles. Two verses later he is filled with the Holy Spirit (9.17; 'πλησθῆς πνεύματος ἁγίου'). Though this verb πίμπλημι is Luke's general word for being Spirit-filled, it was also commonly used in conjunction with σκεῦος for the idea of filling a container (e.g., 2 Kings 4.8). In the interpretation of the apostolic fathers, we also find this concept of human 'vessel' as container of the Spirit. In the

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<sup>41</sup> Barnett, *Second Corinthians*, 345-6.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., light/darkness fits into an aesthetic category and Christ/Belial an authority/allegiance category.

<sup>43</sup> This is at least the intent of Solomon's temple project, though in 1 Kings 8.27 (cf. 2 Chron 2.6; 6.18) he acknowledges the impossibility of this confinement of the divine. And yet Israel is told that 'the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him' (Hab 2.20). This is in contrast to the lifeless and quiet idol that has no ability even to speak (Hab 2.18-19)!

Epistle of Barnabas 7.3 we read that Christ was to offer up for sins ‘the vessel of the Spirit (τὸ σκεῦος τοῦ πνεύματος)’.<sup>44</sup> Certainly this resonates with Paul’s perspective that the human vessel (‘σκεῦος’) holds a powerful treasure inside (2 Cor 4.7).<sup>45</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The interpretation that has been proposed in this study of 1 Thessalonians 4.4 and its context is complex (though no more than most other theories on the subject) and thus a summary of the main elements of this reading may be helpful. Primarily, based on the closest semantic and syntactical parallel in language, the Epistle of Jeremiah’s discourse on idolatry (specifically v. 59) offers an insightful combination of κτάομαι and σκεῦος. In this apocryphal letter, an idol is compared to a common household vessel. It is better to have a simple ordinary cup or bowl that may be of some use to the owner (‘ὁ κεκτημένος’), than to have a purposeless and worthless idol that offers nothing to the one who possesses it. The implication is that an idol is empty and cannot accomplish anything of value. Paul, picking up on this sort of analogy, may be referring to his readers as vessels that may or may not be of worth to the one who possesses it. If it is rendered useless (in this case by sexual immorality), it is no better than an idol. This does not presume that Paul or his readers were dependent on the Epistle of Jeremiah. Both in the OT and in early Jewish literature there were many texts that contained critiques of idolatry and often repeated the same arguments.

The scholarly discussion on this matter is carried forward in this reading because it is able to interact with and attempt to resolve a

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<sup>44</sup> Carras (‘Jewish Ethics’, 310) has a same appraisal of the language of ‘vessel’ in 1 Peter 3.7.

<sup>45</sup> J.-F. Collanges (*Enigmes de la deuxième épître de Paul aux Corinthiens: Etude exégétique de 2 Cor. 2:14-7:4* [SNTSMS 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972], 146) sees 2 Cor 4.7 as referring to the honor and dignity of a ‘vessel’ that is an instrument of God (See Isa 10.15; 54.16; Acts 9.15).

number of corollary issues. First, as has been stated, it takes seriously the need to understand the relationship between κτάομαι and σκεῦος, whereas previous attempts have focused on one or the other. Second, one must account for the very Jewish character of the paraenesis that is prominent throughout 1 Thessalonians 4. The suggested interpretation takes into account that we have little understanding of exactly what Paul taught to the Thessalonians, but we can be quite certain that it at least involved the nature and problem of idolatry (1 Thess 1.9-10). Third, the interpretation must account for the specific focus on πορνεία (4.3) which is Paul's singular interest in the matter of holiness and sanctification in this passage. As it has been shown, in Jewish thought (and evidenced in early Christianity), sexual immorality was regularly tied to idolatry. This is reinforced in the statement in 1 Thessalonians 4.5 that the 'ἔθνη' indulge in lust because they do not know the true God. Finally, a good interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4.4 will attempt to read his metaphorical understanding of σκεῦος first in light of his usage elsewhere (Rom 9.21-23; 2 Cor 4.7; cf. 2 Tim 2.20-1), and also in comparison with other New Testament authors (Acts 9.15; 1 Pet 3.7). We have attempted to take seriously that Paul brings in close proximity his language of vessel and Spirit-endowment which is juxtaposed with idols that are empty vessels containing no breath.

As a final remark, it should be observed that the interpretation proposed offers an important insight into how Paul taught his converts. If our reading is correct, what Paul taught in terms of his message of 'salvation' or 'the gospel' (i.e. turning from idols to serve God) was also redeployed to address ethical issues (such as sexual immorality).<sup>46</sup> Though expressed a bit differently, Morna Hooker espouses this perspective by stating that 'in dealing with moral problems, Paul goes back to first principles – and that means, that he goes back to the gospel'.<sup>47</sup> In the end, our interpretation is more than

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<sup>46</sup> Is this not demonstrated in Paul's strategy to know nothing among the Corinthians but 'Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2.2)?

<sup>47</sup> *From Adam to Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 66.

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a ‘modest proposal’,<sup>48</sup> but neither will it likely ‘break the impasse’,<sup>49</sup> in scholarship on 1 Thessalonians 4.4. Rather, it is hoped that this reading will advance the discussion by bringing relevant background texts to light and situating the discussion within the literary context with an eye towards Paul’s theology and teaching in 1 Thessalonians and elsewhere.

Nijay Gupta

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<sup>48</sup> J. Bassler’s ‘Σκεῦος: A Modest Proposal for Illuminating Paul’s Use of Metaphor in 1 Thessalonians 4:4’ (*Social World of the First Christians* [ed. L.M. White & O.L. Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 53-66) suggests that the most appropriate parallel is 1 Cor 7.36-38 and ‘spiritual marriages’ – each one should know the benefits of having a virgin partner.

<sup>49</sup> See Smith, ‘1 Thessalonians 4:4: Breaking the Impasse’, which, though quite useful, is a bit too optimistic.