

AUTHENTEIN

A Summary

The Greek term *authentēin* occurs only one time in the New Testament at 1 Timothy 2:12, where Paul writes: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to **have authority over** a man; she must be silent” (NIV; the English Standard Version has “exercise authority over”). Given this single occurrence in the New Testament itself, scholars have had to look elsewhere for clues as to its probable meaning in this passage. Until recent years they have been hampered by the relatively few occurrences of the word discovered in ancient Greek literature, including writings contemporaneous with the New Testament. However, thanks to the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* project founded in 1972 by the University of California, Irvine, and a data bank of ancient papyri at Duke University, researchers now have access to the collected and digitized texts of over 3300 authors and 11,000 works stretching from the 8th century BC to 1453 AD.

During the past 20 years a number of major studies of *authentēin* have been conducted making use of the vastly expanded database available. L. E. Wilshire who isolated 314 references to the term and its cognates published the first of these studies in 1988. Scholars have now been able to refine their conclusions and to limit significantly the probable range of meaning for this New Testament *hapax legomenon* (occurring once). In this response to a request from the Atlantic District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod regarding the meaning of *authentēin*, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations has summarized this current research and the conclusions drawn from it, focusing on the most thorough and comprehensive of them. The Commission has limited itself to the more narrow task of describing the lexical aspects (relating to word meaning and vocabulary) of the research, rather than to an exegetical analysis of 1 Timothy 2:12 itself.

Debate surrounding the meaning of *authentēin* in 1 Timothy 2:12 has focused on whether the term is to be viewed as a general or positive concept, with no pejorative connotation, or whether it has a negative or pejorative meaning (such as “domineer”). The research of those who have examined in detail all the evidence now available to us shows that the predominant meaning of *authentēin* in the Greek-speaking world during the time of Jesus and Paul was the non-pejorative or positive meaning “to exercise authority over.”

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Atlantic District Request

1. The Assignment.

In a letter dated June 8, 1994, the President of the Atlantic District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod forwarded a resolution from the Atlantic District Convention (June 3-4, 1994) requesting that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations address concerns related to the “terms and definitions” of the following “as they explicate how women function as the church”: Priesthood of Believers, Order of Creation, and the Greek word “*authentēin*” as used in 1 Timothy 2:12. At the Commission’s September 1994 meeting, its Executive Committee forwarded this request to Standing Committee II “as it continues its work on the document ‘Service of Women in Congregational Offices.’” While it did not become possible for the Commission to incorporate a treatment of these topics in its 1994 report on *The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices* (adopted in November 1994), these subjects remained on the agenda of the Commission for inclusion in other studies related to the role of women in the church (e.g., the study on *Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language* [1998] and the “Comprehensive Study of the Scriptural Relationship of Man and Woman” requested by the 1995 convention).

In reviewing the Atlantic District’s assignment, and in light of significant advances in the lexical study of the Greek word *authentēin* (1 Timothy 2:12) in recent years, the Commission is now better able to respond to this portion of the District’s request by providing a summary of the current research on this word. It is not the

Commission's intention in what follows to present a detailed exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:12ff., or to address contemporary applications of this text in the church's life and work. A review of the considerable literature on this word quickly reveals, however, that a determination of its definition (it occurs only once in the New Testament at 1 Tim. 2:12) is a matter of no small importance. In his comprehensive and landmark study in 1995, H. Scott Baldwin has made the observation that "the various definitions proposed result in surprisingly different interpretations of the verse" (1 Tim. 2:12).¹

2. Background.

David K. Huttar, professor of Bible and Greek at Nyack College in Nyack, New York, has recently written a highly technical article on the occurrence of *authenthein* in a 9th century A.D. manuscript of Aeschylus's [d. 456 B.C.] *Eumenides*. He begins the article by noting that "numerous articles have been written on this word, trying to establish whether it may have a general sense of holding authority over or whether its predominating sense is that of a certain kind of authority (illegitimate, violent, abusive, etc.)."² During the past two decades at least 15 studies examining in some detail the lexical data³ have appeared, mainly among evangelical scholars holding opposing positions on the role of women in the church (commonly referred to as a debate of complementarians vs egalitarians).⁴

In 1979 Catherine Kroeger, a classics student at the University of Minnesota,

¹ Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin, eds., *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 66.

² David K. Huttar, "AUTHENTEIN in the Aeschylus Scholium," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (December 2001): 615-25, esp. 615.

³ There are, of course, countless discussions in various commentaries, books, and articles, but the reference here is to lexical studies as such.

⁴ A comprehensive review of this debate and the various questions at issue is presented by Wayne Grudem in his recently published 850-page book *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2004).

published an article in which she argued that *authenteō* is an erotic term best translated “to engage in fertility practices,” the implication being that in 1 Timothy 2 Paul is countering specific heretical aberrations in ancient Ephesus and hence not laying down a principle applicable for all time.⁵ Kroeger’s article prompted a series of responses that challenged the methodology and substance of her study, leading one scholar to conclude that her proposal was “more curious than substantive.”⁶ In 1992 Kroeger and her husband Richard argued for a different meaning, suggesting that Paul used *authenteō* to mean “proclaim oneself author of a man” in response to “a Gnostic notion of Eve as creator of Adam.”⁷

The appearance of a 1988 study by L. E. Wilshire based on a University of California database of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* significantly advanced the lexical study of the term *authenteō*.⁸ Wilshire examined every known occurrence of *authenteō* and its cognates (about 314 references) and concluded the following:

Sometime during the spread of koine, the word ἀὐθεντέω went beyond the Attic meaning connecting it with murder and suicide and into the broader concept of criminal behavior. It also began to take on the additional meanings of “to exercise authority/power/rights” which became firmly established in the Greek Patristic writers to mean “exercise authority.”⁹

⁵ C. C. Kroeger, “Ancient Heresies and a Strange Greek Verb,” *Reformed Journal* 29 (1979):12-15.

⁶ Carroll D. Osburn, “ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ (1 Timothy 2:12),” *The Restoration Quarterly* 25 (1982):1-12. Also responding to the Kroeger proposal were: G. W. Knight, “ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ in Reference to Women in 1 Timothy 2:12,” *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984): 143-57 [the most comprehensive lexical study to this point]; A. J. Panning, “ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ—A Word Study,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 78 (1981): 185-91.

⁷ Richard and Catherine Kroeger in *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:12 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 103. See note 13 below for responses to this latest proposal of the Kroegers.

⁸ The *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG), a research center at the University of California, Irvine founded in 1972, has collected and digitized most literary texts written in Greek from Homer (8 B.C.) to fall of Byzantium in A.D. 1453. It currently contains over 3,300 authors and 11,000 works, approximately 89 million words (this information is taken from www.tlg.usi.edu/~tlg/about.html. See note 18 in Baldwin’s study [Köstenberger, Schreiner, and Baldwin, 72-73] for information on two CD-ROMs available with the full database from TLG and a Duke Data Bank of Documentary Papyri).

⁹ L.E. Wilshire, “The TLG Computer and Further Reference to ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ in I Timothy 2:12,” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988):131.

In a subsequent article Wilshire attempted to “clarify” his earlier work, proposing that *authentēō* probably meant “instigating violence.”¹⁰ However, in an extensive and scholarly study surpassing earlier studies in scope, Albert Wolters of Redeemer University College, Ontario, Canada, has shown that the work of Wilshire and some others¹¹ is methodologically and lexicographically flawed. This is principally because these studies have failed to distinguish carefully not only between the verb *authentēō* and the noun *authentēs*, but more seriously between two meanings of *authentēs* having two distinct semantic fields,¹² only one of which can be established to have a direct relationship to *authentēō*.¹³

We may look with appreciation at the scholarly contributions that have been made during the past 20 years to the study of the Greek word *authentēō*. These studies show conclusively, among other things, that the term was not nearly as rare in ancient usage as previously thought, though conclusions must further be drawn, of course, regarding Paul’s use of it in 1 Timothy 2. Making use of a vastly expanded database, New

¹⁰ L.E. Wilshire, “1 Timothy 2:12 Revisited: A Reply to Paul W. Barnett and Timothy J. Harris,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 65 (1993): 53. See Paul W. Barnett, “Wives and Women’s Ministry (1 Timothy 2:11-15),” *Evangelical Quarterly* 61 (1989): 225-38; Timothy J. Harris, “Why did Paul Mention Eve’s Deception? A Critique of P. W. Barnett’s Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 62 (1990): 335-52; Paul W. Barnett, “*Authentein* once More: A Response to L.E. Wilshire,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 66 (1994): 159-62.

¹¹ See, for example, A. C. Perriman, “What Eve Did, What Women Shouldn’t Do: The Meaning of ἀθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:2,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 129-42.

¹² The term “semantic field” or “semantic domain” refers to a way of classifying the meaning of words according to families of meaning (e.g., words for various plants, words related to each particular human emotion, virtue, kind of behaviors, etc.). The two volume United Bible Societies’ *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* by Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989) classes the senses of various words in this way. See Introduction, Volume 1, vi-xx. See also Peter Cotterell & Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 154-55; 167-68, and Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 101-200.

¹³ Albert Wolters, “A Semantic Study of *authentēs* and Its Derivatives,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000), 145-75. See Grudem, 317. Specifically responding to the Kroegers’ study, which has now been shown to be seriously deficient, are: Al Wolters, “Review: *I Suffer Not a Woman*,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 208-13; Robert W. Yarbrough, “I Suffer Not a Woman: A

Testament scholars have now been able to refine their conclusions and to limit significantly the probable range of meaning for this New Testament *hapax*. As Scott Baldwin notes in the final paragraph of his important work, “We have come a long way in our understanding of the meaning of ἀθεντέω [*authenteō*] as it is used by speakers of koine Greek.”¹⁴

3. Summary of Baldwin’s Study.

In what follows, the Commission has summarized the significant findings of H. Scott Baldwin in his chapter titled “A Difficult Word: ἀθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12” in the Köstenberger, Schreiner and Baldwin book previously mentioned (see note 2) and then also has included a brief summary of the conclusions reached by Al Wolters in his recent comprehensive study.¹⁵ The Baldwin chapter is readily accessible and it is methodologically and lexically thorough. It includes an appendix listing the original Greek texts and English translations of every known occurrence of the verb ἀθεντέω [*authenteō*] for those who wish to examine the evidence themselves. Commendable as well is this study’s cautiously modest approach to the evidence, with the repeated reminder given to the reader that an examination of occurrences of the word contemporaneous with the New Testament *limits the range* of possible meanings (and appreciably so) but does not itself establish with absolute certainty the exact nuance of Paul’s use in 1 Timothy 2:12.

Review Essay,” *Presbyterion* 18 (1992):25-33; and Steven M. Baugh, “The Apostle Paul among the Amazons,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994):153-71.

¹⁴ Köstenberger, Schreiner, and Baldwin, 80.

¹⁵ See note 13 above. Dr. Wolters has kindly provided a copy of his 30-page article to the CTCR staff.

a. Database.

Employing two CD-ROMs containing documentary papyri (as well as ostraca—small pieces of pottery with written items on them) and the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, Baldwin has isolated about 110 occurrences of the word *authentēō*. Removing citations where church fathers quote 1 Timothy 2:12 and another 10 occurrences in an undatable work, Baldwin bases his study on 82 references spanning a period of fourteen centuries (see his “Chronological Distribution Table,” 78).

b. Methodology.

Baldwin begins his study by noting limitations attached to an investigation of the meaning based merely on New Testament and ancient Greek lexicons. Their listings of sources where *authentēō* can be found are very few in comparison to current data available, and there is no precise consensus among them on the meaning of the word.¹⁶ With respect to word studies in general, Baldwin stresses the necessity of analyzing the *context* of each use of a word,¹⁷ a principle given new importance as a result of modern linguistic study. Lexical studies, it should be remembered, do not prescribe what a word must mean nor do they proscribe what it cannot mean in a given context. Rather, they *describe* contemporaneous uses of words. Moreover, no lexical study “is a 100 percent guarantee that a word has a specific meaning in a given passage.” But when a semantic range is established, the burden of proof lies with those who argue for a meaning not normal or well attested. Finally, on the basis of lexical data available and through a

¹⁶ See Baldwin’s Table 3.1 “*ἀὐθεντέω* in Modern Lexicographers” on pages 66-67.

¹⁷ Baldwin warns against the hazards of determining the meaning of words based simply on etymology: “...the principle is evident, once again, that it is language *use*, not etymology, which determines meaning of words” (78).

process of trial and error one must seek to determine the possible meaning of a word in its specific context.¹⁸

c. Results of Analysis of the Data.

Limiting his analysis to the verb *authenteō*,¹⁹ Baldwin concludes that “the one unifying concept is that of *authority*” and he presents the following summary table:

1. To rule, to reign sovereignly
2. To control, to dominate²⁰
 - a. to compel, to influence someone/thing
 - b. middle voice: to be in effect, to have legal standing
 - c. hyperbolically: to domineer/play the tyrant
 - d. to grant authorization
3. To act independently
 - a. to assume authority over
 - b. to exercise one’s own jurisdiction
 - c. to flout the authority of
4. To be primarily responsible for or to instigate something
5. To commit murder (10th Century AD Scholia on Aeschylus²¹)

Baldwin discusses in some detail the data from which each of these meanings is derived, making the final observation that “there appears among these data only limited historical development of the meaning of *authenteō* across fourteen centuries”

[represented by the database].²²

d. Baldwin’s Conclusions.

Baldwin concludes his study by providing the following summary with respect to the meaning of ἀθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12:

1. The root meaning involves the concept of authority.

¹⁸ Baldwin, 66, 69-71.

¹⁹ The study is limited to the verb for three reasons: 1) “numerous examples in Greek [occur] where the verbal form does not correspond to all the meanings of the noun”; 2) “this methodology (separating verb and noun) is the same methodology employed by all recent lexicographers”; and 3) “we have precedent to separate verb and noun forms—particularly in the case of ἀθεντέω from the ancient lexicographer Hesychius” (72-73).

²⁰ Baldwin cautions the reader not to take “dominate” here in the sense of “domineer.” See note 19, page 73, of his essay.

²¹ See note 25.

²² Baldwin, 78.

2. The context of 1 Timothy 2 appears to make meaning 1, “to rule, to reign sovereignly,” impermissible.²³
3. Meanings 2 or 2a, “to control, to dominate” or “to compel, to influence someone,” are entirely possible.²⁴
4. Meaning 2c, “to play the tyrant,” could only correspond to Chrysostom’s unique usage if the context could be shown to intend the same clear use of hyperbole, and the context does not seem to do that.²⁵
5. Noting that ἀθεντέω is transitive, a translation of “assume authority over” (i.e., meaning 3a) could be appropriate, while 3 or 3b, which are intransitive, would not. If a negative meaning were intended, meaning 3c, “to flout the authority of,” could be possible.
6. It is difficult to imagine how meaning 2d, “to grant authorization,” or meaning 4, “to instigate,” would make sense in 1 Timothy.
7. Meaning 5 appears to be impermissible on chronological grounds.²⁶
8. Further syntactical/contextual studies of 1 Timothy are required to decide with certainty among the meanings 2, 2a, 3a, and 3c.

We may note here that following Baldwin’s study in the aforementioned volume, *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, a study of Greek syntax by Andreas Köstenberger sheds more light on the meaning of *authenthein* as it is used in 1 Timothy 2:12. Köstenberger concludes the following based on an analysis of New Testament, as well as extrabiblical, examples of syntactical constructions similar to 1 Timothy 2:12:

Since, therefore, the term διδάσκειν is used absolutely in the New Testament for an activity that is viewed positively in and of itself, and since οὐδὲ coordinates terms that are

²³ In 13 instances the word reflects unhindered authority to act based on inherent or divine right (73).

²⁴ This meaning “reflects authority from the standpoint of actually having control or ability to dominate an object” (73).

²⁵ The only reference intended to convey the negative meaning “tyrannize” or domineer is the c. A.D. 390 Chrysostom quote (75).

²⁶ While Baldwin thinks that tenth century scholium in the Aeschylus text means murder, Huttar, in the previously cited article, has called into question this meaning even in this citation—which occurs nine hundred years removed from the New Testament and even if substantiated hardly provides credible evidence for this meaning. Huttar has found one other occurrence of the word in a manuscript of the 13th century (Huttar, 625; see footnote 3).

either both viewed positively or negatively, ἀθηντέω should be seen as denoting an activity that is viewed positively in and of itself as well.²⁷

That is to say, according to Köstenberger *authentēin* viewed within its grammatical context in 1 Timothy 2:12 should not be understood as having a pejorative or negative connotation (such as, for example, the translation “domineer” would have), but a positive one.

4. The Contribution of Albert Wolters.

In 2000 Dr. Al Wolters of Redeemer University College, Ontario, Canada published his “A Semantic Study of ἀθηντης [*authentēs*] and Its Derivatives.”²⁸ On the basis of a near-exhaustive examination of every occurrence of the noun *authentēs* and its derivatives in classical and Hellenistic Greek, Wolters has concluded that this noun appears to have had three distinct senses in ancient Greek: “murderer,” “master,” and “doer.” For New Testament scholars, he states, “the issue is whether ἀθηντέω in 1 Tim. 2.12 is based on the meaning ‘master’, thus yielding the traditional rendering ‘have authority over’ (possibly with the pejorative connotation of ‘domineering’), or whether it is semantically indebted to one or both of the other two senses of ἀθηντης.”²⁹

Wolters first of all summarizes his findings regarding the three meanings of *authentēs*. The meaning “murderer,” while found 24 times in classical Greek literature of the fifth and fourth centuries BC (almost all in Attic writers), became relatively rare, occurring only 16 times in 7 centuries from its last occurrence in the early fourth century

²⁷ Köstenberger, Schreiner and Baldwin, 91. Köstenberger also argues on syntactical grounds that “teaching” and exercising authority” in 1 Tim. 2:12 may well be “perceived jointly,” though they do not “blend to the extent that they become one concept in which the two constituent elements are no longer distinguishable” (91).

²⁸ See note 13 above. The references in the next six footnotes are to this study by Wolters.

²⁹ Wolters, 146.

BC to AD 312. However, *authentēs* “in the meaning ‘master’ has a very different history.” Wolters has identified 30 examples of this meaning in extant Greek literature from the turn of the era to 312 AD (none of the uses having a pejorative sense), and observes that this became “the dominant sense of the word.” The third meaning mentioned above, “doer,” is extremely rare, and is unattested in the first three centuries after Christ. On the basis of his examination of the data, therefore, Wolters concludes that the meaning “master” eclipsed the meaning “murderer” and became the “ordinary meaning” of *authentēs* in Hellenistic Greek—the meaning “murderer” being no longer understood “by the great majority of Greek-speakers.”³⁰

Wolters then examines three derivatives of the noun *authentēs*, including *authenteō*.³¹ Looking at eight occurrences of *authenteō* before 312 AD, Wolters concludes that all of these examples derive their meaning from *authentēs*, “master,” and “have to do with the exercise of authority or sovereignty, almost always in a non-pejorative sense.”³² Wolters’ overall conclusion is that “there was a great semantic divide in ancient Greek between ἀθέντης ‘murderer’ and all other members of the ἀθέντης family. They belonged to separate semantic domains.”³³

With respect to the implications of his study for the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12, Wolters states, in summary:

First, the verb ἀθεντέω [*authenteō*] should not be interpreted in light of ἀθέντης [*authentēs*] ‘murderer’ (but)... in the light of the meaning which that word had in the living Greek of the day, namely, ‘master’. Secondly, there seems to be no basis for the claim that ἀθεντέω [*authenteō*] in 1 Tim. 2:12 has a pejorative connotation, as in ‘usurp authority’ or ‘domineer’. Although it is possible to identify isolated cases

³⁰ This paragraph is a summary of Wolters’ conclusions on pages 147-49.

³¹ The other two words are: ἀθεντικός (including adverbial ἀθεντικῶς), with its well-attested meaning “authoritative,” and ἀθεντία, almost always referring to authority or sovereignty. Wolters, 153ff.; 161ff.

³² *Ibid.*, 160.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170.

of a pejorative use for both ἀθεντέω [*authenteō*] and ἀθεντία [*authentia*; ‘authority’] these are not found before the fourth century AD. Overwhelmingly, the authority to which ἀθέντης [*authentēs*] ‘master’ and all its derivatives refer is a positive or neutral concept.³⁴

5. Concluding Observations.

a. It is important to repeat the point made at the beginning of this response, namely, that it is not the Commission’s intention in this response to engage various exegetical questions that arise in the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12. Nor is it the Commission’s purpose here to draw conclusions regarding the application of this verse in the contemporary church. For a discussion of what the New Testament says in general about the service of women in the church the Commission recommends the continued study of its 1985 report *The Service of Women: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*.

b. In commenting briefly on the term *authentēin* and the rendering of the Revised Standard Version (“having authority”), the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in its 1968 report on *Woman Suffrage in the Church* expressed the view that “it would seem that such a translation does not fully reflect the significance of this particular term.” The Commission stated that “this term really means ‘usurping authority, domineering, lording it over’ someone,” meaning that women “are not to undertake such things as give evidence of their exercising authority over men in their own right, as persons created to be subject to men.”³⁵ This conclusion was based on the evidence available to the Commission at that time, which was limited largely to the data presented in the standard lexicons.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 170-71.

In its 1985 report on *Women in the Church* the Commission understood *authentēin* in the general sense of “have authority,” noting that “there is no explicit Scriptural background for interpreting its meaning” and that “it is open to varying definitions, some of them quite incongruent with Paul’s actual concern.”³⁶ When this report was being prepared, the Commission was aware of some of the studies of *authentēō* that had begun to appear, most notably those prepared by Armin J. Panning in 1981 and George Knight in 1984. Though Knight’s study was based on a limited database, he concluded in that study: “The R.S.V., N.A.B., N.I.V. and *The Translator’s Testament* have caught the essence of the meaning of ἀθέντης [*authentēō*] and present probably the most satisfactory rendering with their phrase ‘to have authority’.”³⁷ Though they have expanded and refined Knight’s analysis, the lexical studies conducted since 1985, in the Commission’s view, have strongly confirmed Knight’s basic conclusion. The studies have confirmed that the term ought to be translated “exercise authority over.” In the Commission’s view the English Standard Version accurately translates 1 Timothy 2:12: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to **exercise authority over** a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.”

Adopted April 16, 2005

³⁵ *Woman Suffrage in the Church*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1968, 9.

³⁶ *Women in the Church*, 35.

³⁷ Knight, 155.