

The Diversification of Colossians' Text and Women's Status in the Early Church*

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In the Epistle to the Colossians, the family of 06¹ and other documents traditionally labeled as “Western” display notable variant readings in passages concerning women and their status in the Christian community. In this note I will examine these readings with the purpose of detecting what pictures they provide over against the other branches of the tradition. I will also evaluate to what degree, if any, an ideologically oriented scribal tendency is at work.

Colossians 3:11

The majority text reads: ὅπου οὐκ ἔνι Ἑλληγ καὶ Ἰουδαῖος, περιτομή καὶ ἀκροβυστία, βάρβαρος, Σκύθης, δούλος, ἐλεύθερος, ἀλλὰ [τά] πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός (“Where there is no Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is [the] all and in all”).² The alternative *lectio* inserts the words ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ (*masculus et femina* in the Latin versions) between ἔνι and Ἑλληγ, so that the sentence takes up with the statement: ὅπου οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ (“Where there is no male and female”).³ According to the modern

* In 2009 I presented preliminary versions of this note at the Society of Biblical Literature Meetings in Rome (July 3) and New Orleans (November 21). I am deeply grateful to Tommy Wasserman for his generous criticism, advice, and encouragement.

¹ Since the study of 06, 010, 012, and the copies of 06, has led to the construction of a basic *stemma*, we can refer to these manuscripts as a family: 010 and 012 stem from a lost intermediary (X); 06 descends, through another branch of the tradition, from the archetype (Z), which was bilingual and might be older than the mid-fourth century, since it was apparently used by Hippolytus of Rome: cf. Gordon D. Fee, “The Majority Text of the New Testament and the Original Text,” in *Studies in the Theory and Method of New Testament Textual Criticism* (ed. Eldon J. Epp and Gordon D. Fee; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 183–208, here 204.

² The Greek text is quoted according to NA²⁷ (2001 printing). The same text appears in the other critical editions of the New Testament and lies behind the current translations into modern languages. In the present note I do not discuss the textual variants concerning the presence of τὰ before πάντα (placed in square brackets in NA²⁷; omitted in 01*, 02, 04, and a few cursives) and the presence of καὶ between δούλος and ἐλεύθερος (in 02, 06*, 010, 012, 629).

³ A debate concerning this reading emerged during the Humanist age: Erasmus considered it an insertion made under the influence of Gal 3:28 (cf. *Annotata ad Actus Apostolicos, Epistolas et Apocalypsin: Sive Criticorum Sacrorum Tomus VII* [London, 1660], col. 3581, ll. 22–26); Zegerus (i.e., Tacite Nicolas Zegers) remarked that, despite this opinion, the reading has some support: he mentioned Sedulius, Pseudo-Jerome, and the old Latin tradition (ivi, col. 3585, ll. 24–31). Lucas Brugensis, who was in charge of revising the *Vulgata Sixtina*, expressed an authoritative judgment that has been recorded by Tischendorf in his edition: “*non interiicias masculus et faemina, superfluit enim hoc loco*”

editions, this reading is supported by 06*, 010, 012, 629, some early Latin versions, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Faustus (*apud* Augustine), Jovinianus (*apud* Jerome), and Sedulius Scotus.⁴ We might add to this list Pseudo-Macarius, *Hom.* 34.2, which reads: οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκεῖ ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ, δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος.⁵ The external evidence supporting the majority text is substantial; moreover, the variant reading conforms to the parallel passage of Gal 3:28 (οὐκ ἔνι Ἰουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἕλληνας, οὐκ ἔνι δοῦλος οὐδὲ ἐλεύθερος οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ· πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) and recalls Gen 1:27 (ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ ἐποίησεν αὐτούς): it is well known that harmonizations are a hallmark of the “Western” witnesses.

What is striking is that, while in Gal 3:28, Col 3:11, 1 Cor 12:13 (where a shorter version of that formula appears), and Rom 10:12 (where a reminiscence of the same formula can be detected) the list of antithetical pairs begins with “Jew(s)” and “Greek(s),” 06 and its relatives reverse this order by placing “male and female” in the first position.⁶ If we assume a harmonizing interpolation made under the influence of Gal 3:28, it is difficult to account for the position in which the pair “male and female” stands in 06 and relatives, since we rather expect to find it at the end of the list, following “slave and free.” A possible explanation for this placement could be uncovered in the inclination of the author(s) of Colossians for a reversal quotation technique, which is used in 4:10–17 (compared with Phlm 2, 23, 24), 1:14 (compared to Phlm 5), and 2:9–10 (compared to Col 1:15–20).⁷ Such explanation, however, pushes us back to the compositional *milieu* of the letter: on this ground, should we judge the reading supported by 06 as potentially earlier? The external evidence, indeed overwhelming, does not allow one to do so. However, the text of 06 is without doubt closer than any other to its “predecessor text-form,”⁸ the pair “male and female” being a constitutive element of the

(see Constantin von Tischendorf, *Novum Testamentum Graece editio octava* [Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient, 1872; repr. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1965], 2:741).

- ⁴ Hilary of Poitiers, *Tract. myster.* 1.5 (SC 19bis:84); *Tract. Ps.* 137.10 (CSEL 22:740); Ambrose, *Fid. Grat.* 5.14.177 (CSEL 78:281); *Exp. Luc.* 4.9 (CCL 14:109); Augustine, *Faust.* 24.1 (CSEL 25.1:719); Jerome, *Jov.* 1 (PL 23:235); Sedulius Scotus, *Collect. Coloss.* 3.11 (PL 103:229). In the quotations by Hilary of Poitiers, the pair “male and female” does not figure at the beginning of the list; rather, it is placed in the last position. Beside that, in *Tract. Ps.* 137.10, instead of “*masculus et femina*,” the author uses the expression “*non mulier non uir*” (CSEL 22:740).
- ⁵ See Hermann Dörries, Erich Klostermann, and Matthias Kroeger, *Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1964), 261. This could be a free shortened quotation from Gal 3:28; nevertheless, the fact that the pair ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ is placed at the outset of the list suggests that the author had notice of a version of the formula identical to the one standing at Col 3:11 in 06*, 010, 012, 629, and the early Latin witnesses.
- ⁶ Scholars largely agree that in Gal 3:26–28, 1 Cor 12:13, and Col 3:9–11 a traditional pre-Pauline, baptismal saying is incorporated in the texts; see Dennis R. MacDonald, *There Is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 5–14. On Gal 3:28 and parallels, see also Wayne A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *HR* 13 (1974): 164–208; Michel Bouttier, “*Complexio oppositorum*: Sur les formules de I Cor. xii. 13; Gal. iii. 26–8; Col. iii. 10,11,” *NTS* 23 (1976): 1–19; Sheila Briggs, “Galatians,” in *A Feminist Commentary* (vol. 2 of *Searching the Scriptures*; ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; New York: Crossroad, 1994), 218–36, here 218. This baptismal formula is linked with a dominical saying, of which are reminiscent *Gos. Thom.* 22:5 (NHC II,2, 37,20–35); 2 *Clem.* 12:2, 5; *Gos. Eg.* (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.13.92.2–93.1); *Tri. Trac.* (NHC I,5, 132,16–28); Pseudo-Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.7.15.
- ⁷ On this technique, see Angela Standhartinger, “Colossians and the Pauline School,” *NTS* 50 (2004): 572–93, here 574–75. Perhaps we can observe a further instance of it in the order in which the nouns “Greek and Jew” appear over against the other occurrences of the formula in the Pauline letters, where “Jew(s)” precedes “Greek(s).”
- ⁸ I adopt the classification proposed by Eldon J. Epp, who distinguishes four different “dimensions

reunification formula used by Paul and his circle, as well as of the dominical saying underlying the formula itself.⁹

Be that as it may, how much is the meaning of the exhortative discourse affected by the presence of this reading? In the broader context of the entire letter, the cosmic role of Jesus is celebrated, a salvific enterprise that is intended to be brought to fulfillment with Jesus' death and resurrection (1:20, 22; 2:12–15), but that is seen as already in action at the time of the creation of the world (1:16) and even before (1:15, 17). According to this view, Jesus' power strengthens believers (1:11) and renews those who are baptized (2:12), with the subsequent need, for them, to adhere to his will (1:9–10, 23; 2:6–7; 3:1–25; 4:1–6). According to the author, this adhesion implies the generation of a new human being: "You have put off the old man with his actions and put on the new one, who is being renewed toward a full knowledge, according to his creator's image" (3:9–10). This expression alludes to Gen 1:12 in the light of a quite elaborate protological conception, according to which Adam represents the "old man," while the new creation has been revealed by the Christ, and human beings enter it through baptism.¹⁰ In the words ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ, an additional reference to the creation account must be recognized (see Gen 1:27):¹¹ Paul's proclamation of a "new creation" in which "there is no male and female" implies that the order of the Genesis itself has been rewritten through Christ's redeeming action.

Colossians 3:14

Where the majority has ἐπὶ πᾶσιν δὲ τούτοις τὴν ἀγάπην, ὃ ἐστὶν σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος ("And above all these things, love, which is the bond of perfection"), 06 010 012 (it vgmss Ambrosiaster) read ἐπὶ πᾶσιν δὲ τούτοις τὴν ἀγάπην, ὃ ἐστὶν σύνδεσμος τῆς ἐνότητος ("And above all these things, love, which is the bond of unity"). This reading seems to be modeled on Eph 4:2–3: ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων ἐν ἀγάπῃ, σπουδάζοντες τηρεῖν τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος ἐν τῷ συνδέσμῳ τῆς εἰρήνης ("bearing one another with love, making every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace"). In effect, it recalls the concept of primordial unity between male and female in the undivided being created according to God's image that became a model of perfection, a notion shared by a number of early Christian sources.¹² For this reason the reading seems to be linked with, and dependent on, the particular "protological" hermeneutic of this parenetic section, emerging in the reading ὅπου οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ in 3:11.

Colossians 3:18

At the outset of Colossians' household code, where the majority text has αἱ γυναῖκες, ὑποτάσσεσθε τοῖς ἀνδράσιν ὡς ἀνῆκεν ἐν κυρίῳ ("Women, submit yourselves to men, as is fitting in the Lord"), 06* 010 012 075 it vgmss sy^{p,h*} insert the possessive adjective ὑμῶν before ἀνδράσιν. This is an example of secondary intervention made with the purpose of improving

of originality" of a New Testament writing: a predecessor text-form; an autographic text-form; a canonical text-form; and an interpretive text-form. See Eldon J. Epp, "The Multivalence of the Term 'Original Text' in New Testament Textual Criticism," *HTR* 92 (1999): 245–81, here 276–77.

⁹ MacDonald, *There Is No Male and Female*, 113–26.

¹⁰ Frederick F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 147.

¹¹ On the expression "new creation," see Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 144.

¹² See above n. 6.

the autographic text-form: specifically, it remarks that it is not just a general matter of men's and women's status, but that the text addresses the relationship between husbands and wives. In other words, such a formulation refers the statement more explicitly to the family ethic.

Colossians 4:15

Whereas a number of witnesses (including 03, 6, 424^c, 1739, 1877, 1881, the Harclean Syriac, the Sahidic, and Origen) support the reading ἀσπάσασθε τοὺς ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ ἀδελφοὺς καὶ Νύμφαν καὶ τὴν κατ' οἶκον αὐτῆς ἐκκλησίαν ("Greet the brothers who are in Laodicea and *Nympha* and the church that gather in *her* house"), 06, alongside 044, the majority text, the Peshitta, and a marginal reading of the Harclean, reads ἀσπάσασθε τοὺς ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ ἀδελφοὺς καὶ Νύμφαν καὶ τὴν κατ' οἶκον αὐτοῦ ἐκκλησίαν ("Greet the brothers who are in Laodicea and *Nymphas* and the church that gather in *his* house"). Codices 010 and 012 share this reading except for the different accentuation of Νύμφαν, which appears in the feminine form Νύμφαν. It is uncertain whether such an accentuation is to be assigned to the copyists of those two codices or if it came from an older tradition. However, although in the ninth century it was common to write the accentuation signs, accents rarely appeared in Greek New Testament manuscripts before the seventh century: their presence in earlier codices must be ascribed to later correctors and bears no significance for determining which was the first-hand reading.¹³

The form Νύμφαν could be read either as masculine (from Νύμφᾶς) or feminine (Νύμφα). What is meaningful in 010 and 012 is the presence of the possessive adjective αὐτοῦ, which reveals the gender of the name it refers to. We must consider the possibility that a copyist bumped into Νύμφαν without noticing its patent conflict with the masculine form αὐτοῦ. Nonetheless, there is one case in which the masculine Νύμφᾶν is combined with the feminine possessive αὐτῆς: it happens in 1739*, a tenth-century minuscule from the Great Lavra Monastery at Mount Athos. We can affirm, however, that the textual tradition to which 010 and 012 belong intends *Nympha(s)* to be a man, as 06 does.

Finally, some other manuscripts do not read αὐτῆς or αὐτοῦ, having instead αὐτῶν, referring to the brothers from Laodicea or to both the brothers and *Nympha(s)*. This reading is shared by 01, 02, 04, 025, 075, 33, 81, 104, 326, 1175, 2464, and the Bohairic version, among others. As a matter of fact, the textual evidence leads one to consider the form that we find in 06 and the "Western" witnesses as the alteration of an earlier text.¹⁴ The image of a community gathered in a woman's house could be perceived as irritating in itself, not to mention that it could also be indicative of a prominent role played by that woman in her community.

In 3:18 and 4:15 there are instances of alterations that concretely minimize the women's social position; on the other hand, in 3:11 and 3:14 we find declarations of an opposite tone. Let us keep 3:14 separate, since it is probably dependent on 3:11. Concerning the latter, if a bias against women affected the textual transmission, then the statement "there is no male and female" would have been a likely candidate for removal, since it contradicts the authoritative declaration about the necessity of women's subjection to men, which occurs after a few lines (3:18).¹⁵ If

¹³ On this topic, see the handling of the textual problem of Rom 16:7 in Eldon J. Epp, *Junia: The First Women Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 45–48.

¹⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004), 627; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 174; Ben Witherington, "The Anti-feminist Tendencies of the 'Western' Text in Acts," *JBL* 103 (1984): 82–84.

¹⁵ The content of Colossians' household, in particular, caused this letter to be judged "a step toward a Christianity that became increasingly restrictive and even abusive for women, children, and slaves."

so, our reading should be regarded as particularly reliable, since it would bear certain characteristics moving it closer to a *lectio difficilior*, especially in the context of a tradition that draws a quite divergent picture of the women and their status in the community life.

We might even venture to speculate about an explanation for the rise of the competing reading in the variation-unit and find it in the ideological conflict between the expression “there is no male and female” and what is stated in the household code.¹⁶ But this suggestion would be a very hypothetical one, since, as mentioned above, the external attestation of the competing reading is indeed strong. If we consider the $\sigma 6$ readings at 3:11 and 3:14 alongside those at 3:18 and 4:15, we must conclude that we do not have any evidence of such a supposed antiwomen bias. What we have is four readings that point in different directions. A systematic and comprehensive scrutiny of the Pauline Epistles in $\sigma 6$ and its relatives, a task that is still to be done, might bring more decisive arguments. Nonetheless, at the present time, we are facing once more the intrinsic risks of reasoning in terms of ideological tendencies.

A final remark: focusing on the variation unit of Col 3:11 is worthwhile at least for drawing a proper attention to a reading, ὅπου οὐκ ἐνὶ ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ, often dismissed by commentators. Surprisingly enough, even the currents in New Testament exegesis most responsive to gender issues seem to have dismissed it, instead trying to explain why at Col 3:11, in contrast to Gal 3:28, where the same formula is embodied in the text, the pair “male and female” does not appear.¹⁷ However, we recall that “competing readings, even those judged not the most likely original, often have the power to illuminate a text by disclosing alternative ‘readings’ or interpretations of the text in the early Church.”¹⁸ Also, if “interpretive variant readings had authority in one Christian community or another ... there is no more a single ‘canonical’ text than there is a single ‘original’; our multiplicities of texts may all have been canonical (that is, authoritative) at some time and place.”¹⁹ We must recognize that, in specific environments, a version of Colossians containing the statement “there is no male and female” was perceived as the authentic Scripture. As a matter of fact, in the communities where this reading circulated, the believers faced this radical declaration not only when Galatians, but also Colossians, was read in worship or brought into discussion.

See Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Colossians,” in Schüssler Fiorenza, *A Feminist Commentary*, 313–24, here 323.

¹⁶ See above; there is also the continuity with the text-form underlying the passage, which is absent in the other branches of the textual transmission.

¹⁷ See, e.g., the treatment of this passage in D’Angelo, “Colossians,” 321.

¹⁸ Eldon J. Epp, “Textual Criticism in the Exegesis of the New Testament, with an Excursus on Canon,” in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 45–97, here 48.

¹⁹ Epp, “The Multivalence of the Term,” 275–78.