

EXEGETICAL REFLECTION on DEUTERONOMY 25:4 in 1 TIMOTHY 5:18

A Paper

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My Translations¹

Deut. 25:4 (MT) – You shall not muzzle an ox while [it is] threshing.

Deut. 25:4 (LXX) – You shall not muzzle a threshing ox.

1 Timothy 5:18 – For the Scripture says, you shall not muzzle a threshing ox, and the workman is worthy of his wages.

1. Introduction

Many scholars have concluded that Paul allegorizes Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9:9 and 1 Tim. 5:18 in reference to his apostolic right to material support, even if he forewent that right.² This conclusion is reached because commentators find discontinuity between Deut. 25:4 and its immediate context.³ Paul, therefore, does not take the verse out of context because there is no context to consider. Contrary to this position, I will suggest there is continuity between Deut. 25:4 and its surrounding context in Deut. 24-25, and Paul's use is directly tied to that continuity in his application of the uniting principle.

¹ While Paul quotes Deut. 25:4 LXX verbatim in 1 Cor. 9:9, the only variation in 1 Tim. 5:18 is in word order; all four Greek words match though. The variation in word order is insignificant since there is no well-defined sentence structure in Greek like there is in English. For all intents and purposes, the quotation is an identical match. There are also no textual issues between the MT and LXX translations of Deut. 25:4. One insignificant difference is in the verb's syntax. In MT, it is an infinitive construct with an inseparable preposition, which is more appropriately translated "while verb-ing." (Gary Pratico and Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).) In LXX, the verb is in basic form. My translation distinguishes between "an ox while [it is] threshing" (MT) and "a threshing ox" (LXX). Even still, this difference does not change the sentence in any way. Paul also quotes from the words of Jesus, which are verbatim in vocabulary and word order to Luke 10:7, which is also recorded in Matt. 10:10 but with different vocabulary. Paul conflates two straightforward statements by Moses and Jesus (via Luke) into one conjoined quote that he cites only as from "the Scripture."

² James Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938). Charles Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968). William Arndt, "The Meaning of 1 Cor 9:9, 10" *CTM* 3 (1932). Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

³ J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press) suggests it is an "unexpected and isolated provision" (pg. 368). Accordingly, McConville also notes that "Paul interprets the command allegorically..." (pg. 369).

Additionally, in 1 Tim. 5:18 Paul quotes words of Jesus in Luke. Deut. 25:4 and Luke 10:7 both use agricultural language to speak about humans. Paul elaborates more in 1 Cor. 9:9 than in 1 Tim. 5:18 using several examples of his worthy work by use of agricultural language. Paul's conclusion in 1 Tim. 5:18 is nearly identical to his conclusion in 1 Cor. 9:9, and so while agricultural language is absent from 1 Tim. 5:18, the agricultural elaborations in 1 Cor. 9:9 provides a necessary backdrop.

2. Immediate Context of Deut. 25:4

Why would someone muzzle their own threshing ox? There is no financial incentive for someone to muzzle their own ox because the animal is inherently more valuable than the grain it works. Disallowing the ox to eat while it threshes may maximize your harvest but will weaken your more valuable animal. Muzzling one's own ox is likely not what the command is getting at, for such a command would be unnecessary. This command must instead be for a person other than the owner of the ox. This command is directed at a field owner who is *borrowing another's ox* for his own land. Only then would an incentive to muzzle the ox exist, for it would maximize the harvest for the field owner without any responsibility of caring for the weakened animal.⁴

With this understanding, the command does have continuity with Deut. 24-25.⁵ In Deut. 24-25 there are a series of commands that emphasize one person or thing. While the commands sometimes paint the emphasized one negatively, the commands are to protect the emphasized one, even though they are directed at someone else. Several examples are as follows:

⁴ Jan Verbruggen, "Of Muzzles and Oxen: Deuteronomy 25:4 and 1 Corinthians 9:9," *JETS* 49, 2006, especially pg. 705-706.

⁵ Walter Kaiser, "The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:8-10," *JETS* 21, 1978, pg. 16.

In Deut. 24:1-4, the emphasized one—the woman—is who the command is meant to protect, even though it is directed at the first husband.

In Deut. 24:5, the emphasized one—the husband—is who the command is meant to protect, even though it is directed at his military commanders.

In Deut. 24:7, the emphasized one—the kidnapped brother—is who the command is meant to protect, even though it is directed to the kidnapper.

In Deut. 24:10-15, the emphasized one—the poor neighbor who takes a loan—is who the command is meant to protect, even though it is directed at the wealthy loan-giver.

In Deut. 25:1-3, the emphasized one—the guilty party before a judge—is who the command is meant to protect (despite their guilt), even though it is directed at the judge.

In Deut. 25:5-10, the emphasized one—the deceased, heirless husband—is who the command is meant to protect by still providing him an heir, even though it is directed at the brother-in-law. Someone could argue the widow is the emphasized one, and yet there is also protection for her from family shame in this command.

If the above suggestion about to whom is referred by this command is correct, and this command falls into continuity with Deut. 24-25, then the formula would continue as follows: In Deut. 25:4, the emphasized one—the ox—is who the command is meant to protect *for the sake of the owner of the ox*, even though it is directed at the *land-owner borrowing the ox*. If this suggestion is accurate, then the shared continuity revolves around protecting those who are vulnerable to exploitation in the home, work, judicial, financial, etc. In this case, the one

vulnerable to exploitation is the owner of the ox. This coincides with the civil and social laws presented in Deuteronomy 19-26 that emphasize the protection of the vulnerable.⁶

3. Immediate Context of Luke 10:7

In addition to Deut. 25:4, Paul also quotes the words of Jesus as they appear verbatim in Luke 10:7. This account is also recorded in Matt. 10:10 with a slight variation of the worker being worthy of *food* rather than *wages*. That Paul's quotation matches verbatim to Luke's account, but not Matthew's suggests that Luke was Paul's source. This is not a difficult suggestion considering Luke was with Paul (Col. 4:14; Philemon 24). In Luke 10 and Matt. 10, Jesus sends out the Seventy describing their ministry in agricultural language. "The workman is worthy of his wages" is that they not go from house to house but rather accept the "food and drink" they receive. "The workman is worthy of his wages" is a message for the Seventy to be content with whatever material sustenance they receive.

4. Immediate Context of 1 Tim. 5:18

In this brief passage, Paul writes that elders who are good leaders are *worthy* of double honor or an ample honorarium/remuneration. Commentators debate whether the honor is financial or in status, but it appears to be both.⁷ The dual-quote of Moses and Jesus suggests it is financial; however, the elder is afforded an extra layer of protection against accusations due to his status. Certainly both of these are involved in the double honor. "Good leaders" also appears

⁶ D. Instone Brewer, "1 Corinthians 9.9-11: A Literal Interpretation of 'Do Not Muzzle the Ox,'" *New Testament Studies* 38, 1992 suggests that "ox appears to be regarded as a standard legal term for a servant or labourer of any species" (pg. 563).

⁷ Gordon Fee, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Baker), pg. 128-129. George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), pg. 232. William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker), pg. 180.

to be an umbrella term, under which are those who work hard in teaching and preaching. This is not inconsistent with his previous words about elders. While all elders should be *able* to teach, not all will work hard at teaching; elders that do the latter are especially worthy of double honor.

5. Consideration of Paul's Use of Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9:9

Paul's inclusion of Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9:9 is nearly identical to his use in 1 Tim. 5:18. Paul elaborates much more on Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9 than he does in 1 Tim. 5. While the second phrase from 1 Tim. 5:18 "the workman is worthy of his wages" does not appear, it too forms a necessary backdrop.⁸ In defending his apostolic right to material provision, Paul asks, "Are you not my *work* in the Lord?" and "Don't we have the right to *eat and drink*?" In identifying himself as a worker, he then rhetorically insists that he is due his wage, which in Luke 10 is "food and drink." Paul then prefaces his quotation with agricultural language. "Who *plants* a *vineyard* and does not *eat* its *fruit*? Or who *shepherds* a *flock* and does not *drink* the *milk* from the *flock*?" After quoting Deut. 25:4, Paul continues with more agricultural language. "He who *plows* ought to *plow* in hope and he who *threshes* should do so in hope of *sharing* the *crop*. If we have *sown* spiritual things for you, is it too much if we *reap* material benefits from you?" In other words, those who minister should be materially supported by those they minister.

6. Paul's Hermeneutical Use of Deut. 25:4 in 1 Tim. 5:18

It is difficult to consider Paul's use of Deut. 25:4 in 1 Tim. 5:18 without also considering 1 Cor. 9:9. It is clear from how Deut. 25:4 fits into its context that Paul is not allegorizing an otherwise random command. It is also clear from the context of both 1 Cor. 9:9 and 1 Tim. 5:18 that Paul is not seeking to provide a *meaning* for Deut. 25:4; rather, Paul is using the *principle* of

⁸ Fee *1 Timothy*, 129

Deut. 25:4 and applying it to his own circumstance. In combining two of G.K. Beale's categories (analogical/illustrative and abiding authority),⁹ Paul does not *interpret* but rather *applies* Deut. 25:4.¹⁰ Paul does not allegorize due to a lack of context but rather identifies the underlying principle *in* the context.¹¹

His use of *application* with this verse is consistent, for it matches nearly identically in his defense of his right and the right of elders who work hard in teaching and preaching to receive material support from those to whom they minister. Just as the ox is protected from being exploited by those with an incentive to maximize their own benefit, so also are ministers. Ox and ministers alike are exploited when their material needs are deprived. What is it that the ox and the minister need? What wage is the workman worthy of receiving? Food and drink.

Moreover, just as the landowner is borrowing the ox from another, so also are congregations borrowing their shepherds from another—God. A landowner who muzzles a borrowed ox uses the ox to exhaustion without taking responsibility of restoring the weakened ox. Likewise, a congregation who muzzles their minister(s) uses their minister(s) to exhaustion without taking responsibility of restoring the weakened minister. The owner (God) who the congregation borrowed the minister from suffers because of their exploitation. Hanson concludes it must be allegory because “there is no integral connection between the clergyman and an ox.”¹² What Hanson misses *is the integral connection* found in the principle of protecting the vulnerable from exploitation captured by Jesus' words from which Paul appropriately quotes. Paul does not allegorize by equating himself with the ox effectively deriving a hidden meaning

⁹ Greg Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012).

¹⁰ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) argues (his italics) “Paul does not speak to what the law *originally meant* ... [but] what it *means*, that is, with its *application* to their present situation” (pg. 407). Kaiser “Crisis” marks a distinction between “meaning” and “significance,” pg. 16-17.

¹¹ Verbruggen, 710

¹² Anthony Hanson, *Living Utterances of God: The New Testament Exegesis of the Old*, (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1983), pg. 136.

from the text; rather, by analogy, Paul states that the principle uniting the literal meaning of the various commands in Deut. 24-25 continues to abide. The workman is *still* worthy of his wages.

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