

WOMAN'S DESIRE FOR MAN: GENESIS 3:16 RECONSIDERED

IRVIN A. BUSENITZ

Lexical and etymological studies of the words of Gen 3:16b yield little help for interpreting the meaning of the woman's desire for man. Contextual evidence, however, indicates that the woman's desire for the man and his rule over her are not the punishment but the conditions in which the woman will suffer punishment. Although there are linguistic and thematic parallels between Gen 3:16b and Gen 4:7, contextual differences and interpretive problems indicate that Gen 4:7 cannot be used to interpret the meaning of "desire" in Gen 3:16. Cant 7:10[11] provides a better context for understanding the word. It may be concluded that, in spite of the Fall, the woman will have a longing for intimacy with man involving more than sexual intimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH in the past few decades there has been a proliferation of books and articles discussing biblical norms for the role of women both in society and in the church, a consensus of interpretation has not emerged. The complexity of the issue, coupled with the exegetical difficulty of relevant Scripture, has made general agreement elusive. Part of the discussion has focused upon the last phrase of Gen 3:16: "yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."¹

Various interpretations have been propounded for the meaning of this phrase, centering primarily around the definition of "desire." One prominent interpretation suggests that, as a punishment for the Fall, a woman's desire will be subject to her husband's. "Her desire, whatever it may be, will not be her own. She cannot do what she wishes, for her husband rules over her like a despot and whatever she wishes is subject

¹ All biblical quotations from NASB unless otherwise noted.

to his will."² Another viewpoint contends that the woman will have an immense longing, yearning, and psychological dependence.³ More recently a third view has surfaced. It suggests that, based on the usage of "desire" in Gen 4:7, the woman will desire to dominate the relationship with her husband. "The woman's desire is to control her husband (to usurp his divinely appointed headship), and he must master her, if he can."⁴

LEXICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Hebrew term rendered "desire" is **קָוַשׁ** and is derived from **קָוַשׁ**. It is given the general lexical meaning of "attract, impel, of desire, affection";⁵ however, due to its infrequent occurrence in the OT (Gen 3:16; 4:7; Cant 7:10[11]),⁶ the semantic range is unclear. The etymological data is equally obscure. The word may be related historically to the Arabic *saqa* (which is often used in contexts indicating sexual desire) or *saqa* (which is used in a more general sense of desire).⁷ Nevertheless, *saqa* does not demand sexual connotations and *saqa* does not rule them out.⁸ In light of its usage in Gen 4:7, the term appears to have a meaning which is broader than sexual desire.

Perhaps the translators of the LXX attempted to clarify their understanding of the term by translating it with **ἀποστροφή** in Gen 3:16 and 4:7, but with **ἐπιστροφή** in Cant 7:10[11]. The preposition **ἀπό**, when attached to the verb **στρέφω**, suggests "to turn away," while **ἐπί** suggests "to turn toward." However, it is difficult to understand

² E. J. Young, *Genesis 3* (London: Banner of Truth, 1966) 127; cf. John Calvin, *Genesis* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 172, who contends that 3:16b is an example of Hebrew poetry in which a thought is restated in a subsequent phrase. As such, "and he shall rule over you" is a reassertion of "your desire shall be to your husband."

³ Gini Andrews, *Your Half of the Apple* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 51; cf. H. C. Leupold, *Genesis* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 1. 172.

⁴ Susan Foh, "What Is the Woman's Desire?" *WTJ* 37 (1975) 382; cf. also Foh's *Women and the Word of God* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 69.

⁵ BDB, 1003. The definition given by Koehler and Baumgartner (KB, 1. 1043) is similar: "impulse, urge."

⁶ The significance of the term as used in these three passages is treated below. The number in brackets refers to the versification of the Hebrew text.

⁷ Foh (*Women*, 67) seeks to remove any sexual connotation from "desire" in 3:16b by contending that "the phonemic equivalent of the Hebrew **שׁ** [שׁ of **קָוַשׁ**] is **s** in Arabic. The proper etymology in Arabic for **קָוַשׁ** is *saqa*, to urge or drive on. This meaning need not have sexual connotations."

⁸ In either case, etymology is often of little help in ascertaining meaning, which is determined by context and usage.

by such is dim and inconclusive. Lexically and etymologically, the term קִשְׁרָה is shrouded in obscurity; the verb קִשַׁר and the prepositions לְאִלֵּן and לְעֵלֵךְ are equally impotent to unlock the meaning of Gen 3:16.

CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the study of each of the terms does not shed much light on the meaning of Gen 3:16, the context does. In Gen 3:15 the mention of woman serves as a point of transition to v 16 where the Lord pronounces judgment upon the woman. A similar connection is provided between v 16 and v 17; the mention of the husband in v 16b allows for a smooth transition to the judgment pronounced upon the man in vv 17-19.

The first thing to be noted by the context is the fact that each recipient of God's judgment receives one punishment. In the case of the serpent (3:14), he would move on his belly: similarly, Satan (3:15) receives one judgment--a death blow administered by the seed of the woman.¹⁶ In the judgment upon man (3:17-19), the ground will not readily yield its fruit. In Gen 4:11, Cain too is the recipient of only one punishment. Consequently, in 3:16 woman is probably the recipient of only one judgment.

Second, in each of the judgments which God pronounced in Gen 3:14-19 and 4:11-12, the nature of the curse has no essential relationship to the nature of the sin committed. The ground not readily yielding its fruit has no essential relationship to Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit; the fact that the serpent would now crawl on the ground has no integral connection to his enticing conversation with the woman. Consequently, one should not assume that the woman's punishment is to be sealed forever under the control of her husband, because she stepped out of her divinely ordained role of submission and followed the admonition of the devil.

Third, the judgments given to the woman and the man (3:16-19) revolve around propagation and seed.¹⁷ "Both sentences involve

¹⁶ This argument follows the view that Satan is being addressed in v 15. It is doubtful that the term "enmity" (קִשְׁרָה) can be limited merely to a hostility between man and beast, for elsewhere the term is employed only of enmity between morally responsible agents (cf. Num 35:21, 22; Ezek 25:15; 35:5). Furthermore, if the v 15 judgment refers to the serpent, then it is essentially no judgment at all, for animals in general exist under a similar relationship with man.

¹⁷ The opening statement of 3:16: "I will greatly multiply your pain and your conception" is probably a hendiadys--an idiomatic phrase referring to pain which results from pregnancy. In addition to the fact that it is doubtful if an increased fertility cycle would constitute a punishment, the next phrase combines the two thoughts: "in pain you shall bring forth children." Cf. Cassuto's suggestion (*Genesis*, I. 165) that "a better interpretation is: your suffering in general, and more particularly that of your child bearing."

pain/toil, and both affect the bringing forth of life, human and otherwise."¹⁸ The context speaks not of the desire of woman to rule the man but of the continuation of life in the face of death. Such is the central element of 3:16a. Such is the focal point of 3:17-19. Thus, there is good cause to believe that the same idea is present in 3:16b.

Fourth, in the contextual development of Genesis 3 the woman is specifically addressed in 3:16, while the man is the object of God's pronouncement of judgment in 3:17-19. If the "desire" of 3:16b is the desire of the woman to control and dominate her husband, then the sentence is no longer a judgment upon the woman; rather, it is the man who bears its brunt. Yet man's judgment is not mentioned until 3:17. "Since the punishment was specifically intended for the woman and her female descendants, and was not a penalty shared with the men, it had inevitably to be of a nature restricted to the female sex."¹⁹

Fifth, in each of the punishments the pronouncement is given first, then an explanatory statement follows. In the case of the serpent (3:14) the explanatory phrase is "And dust you shall eat all the days of your life." Serpents are not dust-eaters per se; rather, the phrase is an explanatory elaboration of the fact that they would crawl around on their bellies. In 3:15 the punishment is essentially enunciated in the phrase "And I will put enmity between your seed and her seed," with the subsequent phrase denoting the extent of that enmity, namely, death. In 3:17-19 the punishment directed toward Adam is the cursing of the ground (3:17a); 3:17b-19 is explanatory, describing how this punishment would affect Adam and his descendants.²⁰ The same is true in 3:16; the last phrase must be closely related contextually to the punishment recorded in 3:16a. Since each of the explanatory statements in 3:14, 3:15, and 3:17-19 is inseparably linked to the judgment statement, it would be exegetically inadvisable to divide 3:16 into two separate, unrelated punishments. Rather, 3:16b is elaborating on 3:16a. The "desire factor" is not a part of the judgment but an explanation of conditions and relationships as they will exist after the Fall. Even though the intimacy between the first man and his wife was abrogated,²¹

¹⁸ Foh, *Women*, 67. The judgment of both the woman and the man affects their physical being. For the woman, pregnancy and childbirth will be accompanied by great hardship and toil. The judgment on man will also involve hard labor (note the same word [אָנָה = pain] used in both 3:16 and 3:17).

¹⁹ Cassuto, *Genesis*, 1. 164.

²⁰ Cf. Gen 4: 11-12 where the punishment of Cain is a further cursing of the ground (4:11), while the statement that he would be a vagrant and wanderer on the earth (4:12) is an explanation of the judgment, describing the extent and impact of it.

²¹ God's words in Gen 3:16b do not "destroy the harmony of marriage" (Foh, "Woman's Desire," 383), for such harmony was broken earlier (cf. "his wife" of 2:24, 25; 3:8 with "the woman" and the phrase, "which You gave to me, she gave. . ." in 3:12). Though Eve is later called "his wife," the initial intimacy appears to be gone.

even though the unity with man would bring woman to the threshold of death itself in the process of childbirth" yet woman would still possess a strong desire to be with man. The broken intimacy and the pain in childbearing would not be allowed to nullify the yearning of woman for man and the fulfillment of God's command to populate the earth²² or to alter the divine order of the headship of man.

It is equally tenuous to maintain that the phrase "and he shall rule over you" was given because Eve had usurped the authority and leadership role of Adam when she took and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The sin of the first woman was not that she took the lead without seeking the prior counsel of Adam. No such prior consultation was needed, for she herself knew God's commandment prohibiting them from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17). The woman's sin was that she exalted herself above her Creator. She took it upon herself to determine, together with the counsel of the serpent, if God's law was good or bad, if it was right or wrong. Her sin had nothing to do with denying Adam his rightful role of leadership in their marriage or with grasping a role that belonged to her husband. The only role that Eve usurped was that of God's, a usurpation that is characteristic of all acts of sin of all people living in all times of the history of mankind.

Woman may desire to dominate or rule over man, but it is not a part of the punishment pronounced upon woman; it is just the essence, character, and result of all sin against God. Self-exaltation and pride always result in the desire to dominate and rule. Every person to some extent desires to dominate and rule over others--not just woman over man.²³

GENESIS 4:7

One of the two passages most directly related to this discussion is Gen 4:7. While there are linguistic and thematic parallels between this verse and Gen 3:16, there are also differences. Furthermore, the

²² This element should not be dismissed too readily, for there is every reason to believe that the broken intimacy, together with the deadly pain of childbirth, would be sufficient to place the command to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (1:28) in jeopardy (cf. also Gen 11:4, 9).

²³ The NT commands to submit to the husband's authority (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; I Pet 3:1) do not suggest that woman's desire to rule over man is a part of the Genesis 3 judgment. These passages incorporate admonitions directing slaves to submit to their masters, children to obey their parents, and younger men to submit to their elders, indicating that nonsubmissive attitudes and actions are the result of sin. To be certain, women may seek to usurp authority not rightfully theirs. But it is an action which is the consequence of sin and not a result of the judgment of Gen 3:16.

interpretation of Gen 4:7 faces unique difficulties all its own.²⁴ Generally speaking, there have been two interpretations. The less common interpretation posits Abel as the antecedent of **תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ** ("his desire"), suggesting that if Cain does what is right, then he will be lifted up and restored to his position of preeminence which formed a part of his birthright as the older brother.²⁵ "From the latter clause of the verse it is evident that God alludes to the prerogatives of the birthright which Cain would be in no danger of losing if his conduct were such as it ought to be."²⁶ This interpretation embodies at least two favorable aspects. The first is contextual, for it readily accounts for the actions of Cain toward Abel in the following verse.²⁷ The second is grammatical, for in **תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ** ("his desire") the pronominal suffix is masculine. If the antecedent were "sin [**תַּחֲטִיף**] crouching at the door," one would expect a feminine pronominal suffix, since **תַּחֲטִיף** is feminine.

A more common understanding of Gen 4:7 is that sin, pictured as a wild beast, is waiting to pounce upon and control its victim. "The fem. **תַּחֲטִיף** is construed as a masculine, because sin is personified as a wild beast, lurking at the door of the human heart, and eagerly desiring to devour his soul (1 Pet. v. 8)."²⁸ This view benefits from the closeness of the pronominal suffix ("his desire") to the antecedent ("sin crouching at the door"); yet, despite the personification of sin as a wild beast, it suffers from the discord of gender.

Regardless of which view one espouses, neither is sufficiently certain to allow it to become the basis for establishing the meaning of **קִשׁוּ** in Gen 3:16. It is readily admitted that there are some noteworthy similarities between Gen 4:7 and Gen 3:16. Both are given in a context of divine judgment. Both come from the hand of the same writer. Both employ similar terminology.²⁹ It is true that "the proximity of Genesis 4:7 to Genesis 3:16 suggests that a similar grammatical construction

²⁴ Many commentators readily admit that the verse is one of the most difficult in all of the OT to explicate. Skinner (*Genesis*, 107) has observed: "Every attempt to extract a meaning from the verse is more or less of a *tour de force*, and it is nearly certain that the obscurity is due to deep-seated textual corruptions." Suggested textual emendations are feeble at best and have generated little light.

²⁵ The term **שָׁאֵף** ("lifted up") is used in Gen 49:3 in the sense of "preeminence." In this view "desire" would mean "to be subservient to" as to the firstborn of the family (cf. Gen 27:29).

²⁶ George Bush, *Notes on Genesis* (2 vols; reprinted, Minneapolis: James and Klock, 1976) 1.99.

²⁷ The disaffectionate relationship which developed between Esau and Jacob over the matter of birthright (Genesis 27) is significantly analogous.

²⁸ C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Genesis* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 112.

²⁹ Gen 3: 16:	קִשְׁלֵךְ	וְהָא	תְּשׁוּקָתְךָ	וְצֵל־אִישְׁךָ
Gen 4:7:	תְּמַשְׁלֵבּוּ	וְאַתָּה	תְּשׁוּקָתוֹ	וְאֵלֶיךָ

would have similar meaning.³⁰ But since Gen 4:7 is besieged with interpretive uncertainties, it ought not to be applied unreservedly to interpret Gen 3:16.

Furthermore, Gen 4:7 is not as parallel to Gen 3:16 as it may appear. First of all, Gen 4:7 is figurative while Gen 3:16 is literal. Hermeneutically, one should proceed from the literal usage to the figurative usage if one's exegesis is to have validity.³¹ Second, while the grammatical construction is similar, the two phrases are actually inverted in sense. In 4:7 the object of the desire (Cain) is also the recipient of the curse. However, in 3:16 the object of the desire (the man) is not the recipient of the curse. For 3:16 to be truly parallel with 4:7, the desire of woman would have to be part of the judgment against the man. Third, similarity in grammar need not demand similarity of meaning. Verbal parallelism may be only coincidental. As shown above, the context of Gen 3:16 does not indicate that the woman desires to dominate her husband. If it is to be found in Gen 3:16, it must be imported from Gen 4:7. However, the context of Genesis 3 must be given the primary role in determining the meaning of "desire" in 3:16 rather than the linguistic resemblance between 3:16 and 4:7. The thematic links between Genesis 2-3 and Genesis 4³² neither suggest nor imply that, as a part of the judgment of Gen 3:16, woman will desire to dominate man. For example, in Genesis 2-3 there is intimacy between God and man; then sin turns that intimacy to alienation. There is intimacy between man and woman; then sin causes intimacy to become alienation. In Genesis 4, intimacy between God and Cain turns to alienation, and intimacy between Cain and Abel turns to alienation. But in each case the broken intimacy, alienation, and punishment are not allowed to go beyond God's intended extent.³³ In the example of Cain, his death would be strongly avenged (Gen 4:15). The thematic relationship suggests that such is the case in Gen 3:16b. The alienation between man and woman and the pain of childbirth resulting from intimacy, would not be allowed to interrupt woman's desire for man, man's rulership over woman, or the carrying out of the command to populate the earth (Gen 1:28).

CANTICLES 7:10[11]

Cant 7:10[11] contains the third Occurrence of the word **שׁוֹק**: "I am my beloved's, and his desire is for me." While the meaning of **שׁוֹק** may

³⁰ Foh, *Women*, 69.

³¹ It is difficult to perceive how one could determine how sin desires Cain and then utilize that as the basis for determining how woman desires man.

³² Cf. Alan J. Hauser, "Linguistic and Thematic Links Between Genesis 4:1-6 and Genesis 2-3," *JETS* 23 (1980) 297-305.

³³ Scripture is replete with instances of divinely established parameters in the punishment of mankind (cf., e.g., Exod 20:25; 21:23-25).

be difficult to determine precisely in its two previous occurrences, there is little doubt here. It speaks clearly of the natural power and compulsion of the love of an individual for another. The slightest hint of one desiring to dominate the other is totally absent. Says Zockler: “הַשׁוֹקֵה as in Gen. iii.16, the passage which lies at the basis of this, [speaks] of the longing desire of the man for the society of his wife, not of gross sensual desires for sexual intercourse. The whole is a triumphant exclamation in which Shulamith joyfully affirms that her lover cannot exist without her.”³⁴

It appears that the usage of שׁוֹק in Canticles is closer to that of Gen 3:16 than is Gen 4:7, notwithstanding the latter's grammatical similarities and textual proximity. First of all, the plain must be employed to interpret the obscure and difficult if there are contextual reasons to believe that both usages are similar. Such is the case between Gen 3:16 and Cant 7:10[11]. The abundantly clear meaning of "desire" in Cant 7:10 [11] should be given priority in the determination of the meaning of "desire" in Gen 3:16. Second, "desire" is used literally in Cant 7:10[11], just as it is in Gen 3:16; in Gen 4:7 the usage is figurative.³⁵ Third, in distinction from Gen 4:7, both Cant 7:10[11] and Gen 3:16 address relationships between the opposite sexes. As such Cant 7:10[11] and Gen 3:16 share a contextual relationship which is foreign to Gen 4:7.

The true difficulty, then, is not understanding the meaning of "desire" as used in Cant 7:10[11] and Gen 3:16, but as it is used in Gen 4:7. This is noted indirectly by Skinner in his comment on Gen 4:7: "The word הַשׁוֹקֵה is unsuitable, whether it be understood of the wild beast's eagerness for its prey or the deference due from a younger brother to an older."³⁶ The reason שׁוֹק is so unsuitable is because the other two usages speak of the power of attraction between the sexes. To grant Gen 4:7 in its obscurity a determinative role in the interpretation of Gen 3:16 without permitting the clarity of Cant 7:10[11] to permeate the exegetical process is to abandon hermeneutical discernment and propriety.

CONCLUSION

The central consideration in the interpretation of Gen 3:16b is context; the meaning of "desire" is best determined in the light of its

³⁴ Otto Zockler, *The Song of Solomon in Commentary on the Holy Scriptures*, by J. P. Lange (tr. & ed. by Philip Schaff; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 119. The rendering "I am my beloved's, and it is an obligation upon me to desire him" is grammatically permissible, especially in light of a similar poetical use of עֲלֵי in Prov 7: 14. However, it is doubtful on contextual grounds, for elsewhere the phrase "I am my beloved's" (6:3; cf. 2: 16) connotes reciprocity.

³⁵ Cf. BDB, 1003.

³⁶ Skinner, *Genesis*, 107.

immediate contextual setting. The context bespeaks procreation and the continuation of life, not the desire to dominate. Furthermore, to appeal to Gen 4:7 with its manifold obscurities to unlock the interpretive door of Gen 3:16 is to throw exegetical caution to the wind. It is much safer to apply the meaning of $\eta\psi\omega\kappa\eta$ in Cant 7:10[11] to Gen 3:16, for while it does not enjoy the near proximity of Gen 4:7, its meaning is plain and its interpretation is virtually unquestioned. Consequently, it should be granted preeminence over Gen 4:7 and become the primary cross-reference in ascertaining the meaning of "desire."

The text does not sustain the interpretation that one aspect of the woman's judgment is that she will desire to dominate and control the man. The last phrase of Gen 3:16 is not a part of the judgment; it is an explanation and description of conditions which will exist after the fall. Thus, the last phrase could be translated: "yet you will still desire [as you did before the Fall, though now tainted by sin] your husband, and he will still rule [as he did before the Fall, though now tainted by sin] over you." The alienation, broken intimacy, and pain in childbirth resulting from the Fall will not be allowed to annul that desire nor abrogate the command to be fruitful.

In spite of the fact that man will rule over woman, and in spite of the fact that intimacy may result in the pain (and possible death) due to childbirth, yet woman will desire and yearn for man. The issue is broader than purely sexual but does not exclude the sexual element. This interpretation does not imply that woman's sexual drives are stronger than the man's. While it is generally concluded that the man has the stronger sexual desire, such is to be expected, for there was nothing in the judgment upon man to temper it. On the other hand, the woman must deal with the pain of childbirth; thus it is to be expected that the woman's sexual desires would be somewhat moderated. Nevertheless, woman's desire for man is an attraction which cannot be uprooted from her nature. The contention that "sin has corrupted both the willing submission of the wife and the loving headship of the husband"³⁷ is unquestionably true. But it is a natural consequence of sin, not a result of God's judgment on the woman in Gen 3:16! Just as the sin-corrupted headship of the husband is not a part of the divine judgment upon the man but a consequence of sin, so the sin-corrupted submission of the wife is not a part of the judgment; it is the result of sin.³⁸

³⁷ Foh, *Women*, 69.

³⁸ While some may contend that the women's liberation movement of recent years does not corroborate this interpretation (Foh, *Women*, 67), the opposite may actually be the case. Many of the women who speak out strongly against the headship of man nevertheless do get married and do bear their husband's children. Certainly it cannot be maintained that this interpretation is contrary to the broader historical perspective.

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200 Seminary Dr.

Winona Lake, IN 46590

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