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**Title** Did Paul Address His Wife in Philippi?

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**Abstract** Using different methodological approaches and considerations, Thomas Wayment and John Gee each approach the question of whether Paul was speaking to his spouse in Philippians 4:3; their intent is to determine if the question can be answered with any degree of confidence. The related question of whether Paul was ever married is not addressed here, although that issue has been of interest since at least the second century AD and perhaps earlier. Instead, these authors consider only the question of whether a specific noun that is sometimes used to refer to a wife was intentionally used that way by Paul.

## DID PAUL ADDRESS HIS WIFE IN PHILIPPI?

Thomas A. Wayment and John Gee

**I**n this short article, or rather two conjoined articles, we (John Gee and Thomas Wayment) have agreed to amicably debate an issue that has been of interest since at least the second century AD, and perhaps as early as the first century AD. The issue is whether or not the apostle Paul addressed his spouse in his epistle to the Philippian saints. This discussion should be distinguished from the larger issue of whether or not Paul was ever married. The larger question is much more complex and requires a significantly longer discussion and the consideration of a larger body of evidence. At the core of the present discussion is the interpretation of Philippians 4:3 and a unique Greek phrase employed by Paul. We have agreed to discuss this issue because we both have strongly held viewpoints, but we agree that the topic, while of historical interest, is not crucial to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Ideally the reader will glean from the present discussion the important insight that this matter is far from conclusive for either of us and that careful scholarship can generate two very different conclusions. If anything, the two points of view help define the limits of scholarship in dealing with this particular issue.

### Thomas Wayment on *Yokefellow* as Missionary

Although not typically debated in the secondary literature of the New Testament, there has for some time been a popular undercurrent to read Philippians 4:3, “And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life,” as a reference to Paul’s wife. The word translated here as “yokefellow” (Greek σύζυγος) may, in some situations, be translated as “spouse” or “wife,” although the word has a complex community of meanings, all of which are centered on two things being joined together or appearing in pairs.<sup>1</sup>

Grammatically, the term *yokefellow* is a noun of two endings, which means that both the masculine and feminine endings are the same in the vocative case in which it appears in Philippians (σύζυγε). This circumstance, unfortunately, confuses the exegete about whether Paul was addressing a male coworker or a female friend or companion. Fortunately, several means of determining the gender of this noun exist. In this situation, the noun is modified by the adjective *true*, which also carries gender-specific endings.<sup>2</sup> In this example, the word *true* (Greek γνήσιε) is by form a masculine adjective and thus indicates that Paul was speaking of a true friend, or a true comrade, who likely had labored with him.<sup>3</sup> By form, if Paul had been addressing a female companion, he would have written the form γνησία σύζυγε.<sup>4</sup> It may be argued here that

1. For the interpretation of the term as “wife,” see Aeschylus, *Cho.* 99 (lyr.); Euripides, *Alc.* 314, 342, 921; *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum* 4175 (Aezani); *Testament of Reuben* 4:1.

2. Koine Greek prefers adjectives of three endings, and in the case of *gnēsie syzyge* we would not expect any collapse of the form of the adjective into two forms, which would account for the confusion of forms. See Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §59.

3. See Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, rev. Gordon M. Messing (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), §§286–87.

4. An example of this can be found in *Acta Monasterii Lembiotissae, Donatio salinae facta cellae sancti Georgii Exocastriatae* (AD 1230): ὁ Βάλκης καὶ Ἄννα ἡ γνησία

Koine Greek, the Greek of the New Testament and patristic authors, would have collapsed the adjective somehow from three into two forms, thus combining the masculine and feminine endings into a single form, but this is unattested.<sup>5</sup>

There are, admittedly, some ways to interpret the adjectival ending as a corrupted feminine form. In many Greek manuscripts letters are routinely interchanged through phonetic confusion or orthographic peculiarities, particularly  $\eta$  for  $\epsilon$  and vice versa. Although the following switch occurs with less frequency,  $\epsilon$  can be interchanged with  $\alpha$ ,<sup>6</sup> which in this instance could account for a feminine adjective and thus make Paul's statement a secure reference to a feminine companion. Ideally, a textual variant would back up this conjectured misspelling; however, such does not exist in the case of Philippians 4:3. Thus there is no textual support for this reading. Early twentieth-century exegetes argued that the noun  $\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\zeta\upsilon\gamma\epsilon$  was actually the vocative form of the name Syzygy, but Syzygy as an independent name has yet to be identified in any Roman period papyri.<sup>7</sup>

In an article written by C. Wilfred Griggs<sup>8</sup> in response to a reader of the *Ensign* who asked whether Paul was married, the author contends that the Philippians passage can be translated to mean that Paul was addressing his wife: "*Gnēsie syzuge*, the words translated 'true yokefellow,' are here taken as feminine, and  $\acute{\eta}\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\zeta\upsilon\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  is a noun that

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$\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\zeta\upsilon\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  αὐτοῦ καὶ Γεώργιος ὁ γνήσιος υἱὸς τούτων. "Balches, his dear wife Anna and Georgios their dear son."

5. For contemporary examples of  $\gamma\eta\eta\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$  + a feminine noun, see Philo, *Fug.* 50.4; and Philo, *Somn.* 2.266.1.

6. Francis T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods: Phonology*, 2 vols. (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1975), 1:278–80.

7. Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983), 521, contains a conjectural emendation in the notes for Philippians 4:3, suggesting that Syzygy in that verse can be interpreted as a name. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. " $\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\zeta\upsilon\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ ," 954, refutes the idea of Syzygy as a name, as does a quick search through the various databases of ancient names.

8. Griggs responded to the query in the I Have a Question section, *Ensign*, February 1976, 35–37.

means ‘wife.’ Ancient commentators believed that Paul was addressing his wife (e.g., Clement of Alex., *Strom.* 3:53:1, and Origen, *Comm. in Ep. ad. Rom.* 1:1), and this is the most sensible translation of the Greek in this context.<sup>9</sup> The matter of whether *syzyge* can be interpreted as a masculine or feminine noun has been treated above, but Griggs raises another important consideration—namely, whether the “most sensible translation” of the word is actually “wife.” This is where the real issue arises. If indeed σύζυγος is the most natural or sensible term for wife, then Griggs is right to think that Paul would have been aware of the connotations of addressing someone with this term. But this seems to oppose much of the existing evidence. In Attic Greek, the noun also carried the connotation of brother,<sup>10</sup> a gladiator’s adversary in battle, an item held in common esteem,<sup>11</sup> or something jointly owned.<sup>12</sup> By the first century, it is obvious that the term had taken on two distinct meanings: a comrade in battle or a wife.<sup>13</sup> As evidence of comrades in battle saluting one another, I mention two inscriptions found in Magnesia that were written nearly contemporaneous with Philippians and are indicative of the shift in meaning of the term: [σ]ύζυγοι·Βαίβιος Κάλλιππος, “companions, Baibios Kallippos.”<sup>14</sup> Another Magnesian inscription is even more concise: Ἀλλέας σύζυγοι φίλοι Δαμαῖς [σύζ]υγοι. “Alleas, comrades, friends, Damas, comrades.”<sup>15</sup>

9. Griggs, *I Have a Question*, 36.

10. Euripides, *Tro.* 1001.

11. Edme Cougny, ed., *Anthologia Graeca: Appendix nova epigrammatum* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1890), 2.26.

12. Apollonius Dyscolus, *De Pronominibus* 51.9. See Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: New York, 1968), s.v. “σύζυγος, ον,” 1670.

13. Euripides, *Tro.* 1001; Euripides, *Iph. taur.* 250; Aristophanes, *Plut.* 945.

14. Found at Magnesia Mai in Asia Minor and therefore in the region of Philippi. Cited in Otto Kern, ed., *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Mäander* (Berlin: Spemann, 1900), 161, Nr. 328; and F. Hiller von Gaertringen, “Die Inschriften: Ausgrabungen im Theater von Magnesia am Maiandros,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Athenische Abteilung* 19 (1894): 50–51, no. 58. The Greek text can be accessed online through [epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/main](http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/main).

15. Found at Magnesia Mai; see Kern, *Die Inschriften von Magnesia*, 160, Nr. 321. Hiller von Gaertringen, “Die Inschriften,” 35, no. 2. The Greek text can be accessed online through [epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/main](http://epigraphy.packhum.org/inscriptions/main).

The abundant epigraphic evidence also contains several important references to the use of *syzygy* in the sense of a wife; that meaning is abundantly clear, although slightly removed from the writing of Philippians. From Thrace and Moesia Inferior, the following inscription from the second or third century AD contains a secure reference to a wife: [ἀγ]αθῆ τύ[χη. Αὐλ]οῦμενης [καὶ Τ]ηρης Βειθοῦ[ς σ]ὺν τῇ συζυγ[ίᾳ], “in good fortune. Auloumenes and Teres Beithous with his wife.”<sup>16</sup> Further unequivocal references come from the third and fourth centuries.<sup>17</sup> The challenge in adopting the meaning of these references is that they are two to three hundred years removed from the time when Philippians was written, and the word appears to have undergone a nuanced change in meaning, much like the modern word *companion* can indicate a number of things, including both wife and friend. So while it is abundantly clear that the meaning of the noun σύζυγος ranged between “companion (comrade in battle)” and “wife,” it was not exclusively used for either. If our surviving evidence is representative of the period in which it was preserved, then it is possible to say that the closest evidence in place and time to Philippi in the first century suggests the meaning would naturally have been “companion.” To say, however, that there is a “most sensible translation” would likely be an ambitious claim for the existing evidence.

Another grammatical issue is the use of the vocative case here, and Gerhard Delling has argued that it is unlikely that *true* can be used in the vocative as a polite reference to a spouse.<sup>18</sup> While I likewise share Delling’s reservations about the contextual meaning of the reference in Philippians 4:3, I would add that no exact parallel exists that would precede the writing of Philippians. If indeed it could be found that such an address was a common way to invoke

16. IG Bulg III,2 1627.

17. Ἀὐρηλία τε Μεσσαεῖνα ἡ σύζυγος αὐτοῦ, IK Selge 66, 3rd century; Λύκος Καλοποῦ τῇ ἰδίᾳ συζύγῳ μνήμης χάριν, *Kretika Chronika (Herakleion)* 23 (1969): 323.

18. Gerhard Delling, “σύζυγος,” in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 7:749.

a spouse, then Delling's concern would be a moot point. As the evidence stands today, it is unlikely that "true yokefellow" was ever used as a public vocative address to a beloved spouse.

### Patristic Evidence to Paul's Marriage

Clement of Alexandria has often been cited as making explicit reference to Paul's wife in 3.6.53 of his work *Miscellanies* (*Stromateis*), the key portion of which reads in Greek: καὶ ὁ γε Παῦλος οὐκ ὀκνεῖ ἐν τινι ἐπιστολῇ τὴν αὐτοῦ προσαγορεύειν σύζυγον, ἢν οὐ περιεκόμεζεν διὰ τὸ τῆς ὑπηρεσίας εὐσταλές.<sup>19</sup> The translation of this particular passage is key to understanding whether Clement thought Paul was invoking his wife here or perhaps a fellow laborer in the gospel.<sup>20</sup> A careful translation of the passage reads: "Even Paul did not hesitate in one of his letters to address his *syzygos*, whom (feminine) he did not take around with him because of the orderliness of the crew." The final phrase (τὸ τῆς ὑπηρεσίας εὐσταλές) is awkward in English, and the Greek context suggests that Clement thought Paul would not take his feminine companion (possibly "wife") with him because of rugged conditions. The next Greek sentence is also critical in interpreting whether Clement thought Paul was married when writing Philippians: λέγει οὖν ἐν τινι ἐπιστολῇ· οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν ἀδελφὴν γυναῖκα περιάγειν, ὡς καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ ἀπόστολοι.<sup>21</sup> This phrase can be translated as follows: "He also says in a certain epistle, 'Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as the remaining apostles?'" (quoting 1 Corinthians 9:5). The logical connection between the two passages is not abundantly clear. It could be interpreted in a number of ways: (1) Clement may mean that Paul was speaking about his wife and that he refused to take her along because of difficult liv-

19. On the interpretation of ὑπηρεσίας as a naval term, see Thucydides, *History* 8.1.2, and for a contemporary interpretation along the lines of "crew" or "group," see Philo, *Quod deterius potiori insidiari solet* 66.3.

20. Clement's claim that Paul was married is repeated with endorsement in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.30.

21. Compare Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.30.1, and Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos, *Hist. eccl.* 2.44.36.

ing and traveling conditions. As evidence that Paul would speak concerning a wife, Clement cites 1 Corinthians 9:5. (2) Clement may mean that Paul is speaking of his wife and then cites a precedent (1 Corinthians 9:5) in which he states that he is aware of others taking women associates along with them even though Paul demonstrates prudence in not taking his wife. (3) Because Clement cites 1 Corinthians 9:5, which speaks of sisters and spouses, it may be inferred that Clement intended to draw attention to the fact that Paul also had a female associate, “a sister in the gospel” like Phoebe or Priscilla, with whom he did not travel because of the difficulty of his living conditions.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, Clement’s reference to Paul’s supposed wife uses two different words—*syzygon* and *gunaika*—and it seems to indicate not a reference to a wife but to a female traveling companion of some sort, most likely a female missionary with whom he had come in contact such as Priscilla.<sup>23</sup>

Admittedly, Clement understands *syzygy* in Philippians 4:3 as a feminine noun, although he clearly does not mention the adjective in a way that would indicate he had considered the gender of the adjective. However, while it is clear that he understands *σύζυγος* as feminine, it is unclear whether he would translate that word as “wife” when the range of meanings for that term might simply indicate a fellow laborer or friend. In fact, Clement may have had theological reasons for considering the possibility that Paul had a *syzygy*. Other Christian writings frequently mention the pairing of similar things as *syzygies*, and thus it is not unlikely that he would search for a scriptural precedent for Paul’s *syzygy*.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, while we might be predisposed to thinking of this in terms of a wife, Clement may actually be drawing a distinction between

22. On this matter, see John Chrysostom, *Hom. Phil.* 13.3, in PG 62:279.

23. For Phoebe, see Romans 16:1; for Priscilla, see Acts 18:2, 18, 26; Romans 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:19. In Romans Paul refers to Priscilla and Aquila as “my fellowlaborers” (τοὺς συνεργοὺς μου) and refers to Priscilla first, unlike the book of Acts, which refers to Aquila (Priscilla’s spouse) first.

24. The *syzygy* of *Pistis Sophia* appears in 1:29–31, 39.8, 50.14; 2:93; see Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.13, 29, and 30. The Holy Ghost is the *syzygy* of the “sun of righteousness,” Malachi 4:2 LXX; Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 7.15.15–16,1. Eusebius notes that Matthew puts himself after his *syzygy*, Thomas, in *Dem. ev.* 3.5.84–85.

the apostles who had wives (γυναῖκα) and the apostle who had addressed a portion of a letter to a female fellow laborer (σύζυγος). The evidence is inconclusive.

Origen's comment on Philippians 4:3 is no less interesting and no less problematic in understanding whether patristic authors thought Paul was married during the time he wrote the aforementioned epistle. Origen, in his *Commentary on Romans*, mentioned a report he had heard concerning what appears to be a unique interpretation of Philippians 4:3.<sup>25</sup> The pertinent section has been preserved only in a Latin translation; although originally written in Greek, this section is missing from the current Greek manuscripts, which raises some suspicion as to its accuracy or authenticity: "Therefore Paul, as some relate, was called while in possession of a wife, concerning whom he spoke when writing to the Philippians: 'And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women,' who was made free from her by mutual consent, called himself a servant of Christ."<sup>26</sup> Fortunately, the reference quotes from Philippians 4:3 directly, thus making it certain that the controversial interpretation raised by Origen is traceable. But what is equally important is the fact that Origen makes it abundantly clear that this opinion is not his own, but that of others. He reports that "some have said" or "according to some."

Whether Origen agreed with any of their conclusions is unclear, and in fact, he seems to be passing on the same information already known from Clement, who declared that Paul would not take his spouse along with him because of the uncertainty of his living and traveling conditions. Here Origen reports that some had supposed Paul and his spouse to have agreed by consensus to permit him to be free, which may imply

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25. Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 1:1, in PG 14:839, hints that Paul was married, although this passage cannot be taken to mean that Paul was married when writing Philippians. The suggested marriage of Paul could have taken place well before his conversion on the road to Damascus or even much later.

26. The quotation from Philippians borrows from the English of the KJV.

that 1 Corinthians 7:27, 32-33 was also under consideration.<sup>27</sup> Whether Paul was married when he wrote Philippians 4:3 is not made clear from Origen's report. What it establishes is that some Christians were of the opinion that he was married, and as justification of that opinion, some had supposed he left his wife behind because of the difficulty of traveling as a missionary and Paul's need to be a servant of Christ. Moreover, it may be that Origen is even offering a summary of Clement's claim that Paul was married, although he distances himself from that opinion.

### Who Was Paul's "True Yokefellow"?

Although the evidence is simply too fragmentary to identify an exact person behind the phrase "true yokefellow," it is helpful to note that on several occasions Paul also addresses a fellow worker without mentioning that person by name: "And we have sent with him the brother, whose praise is in the gospel throughout all the churches" (2 Corinthians 8:18); "And we have sent with them our brother, whom we have oftentimes proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, upon the great confidence which I have in you" (2 Corinthians 8:22); and "I desired Titus, and with him I sent a brother" (2 Corinthians 12:18).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, he also addresses fellow workers with other compound adjectives formed with the preposition σύν; in the case of Philippians 4:3, Paul has used the compound σύν + ζυγός. That Paul would use a compound adjective to praise a fellow laborer/missionary companion is expected from other phrases used by him. He refers to other workers as "fellow prisoners" συναιχμάλωτος (Romans 16:7; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 1:23), "fellow servant" σύνδουλος (Colossians 1:7; 4:7), "helpers" συνεργός (e.g., Romans 16:3, 9, 21), and "fellow soldier"

27. "Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? seek not a wife. . . . But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord: But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife."

28. The Greek may be construed to mean that Paul was referring to Titus as "a brother."

συστρατιώτης (Philippians 2:25; Philemon 1:2). It thus seems clear that Paul was addressing a fellow missionary who was dear to his heart, one who had stayed true to him (compare 2 Timothy 4:10), and one he addressed in this instance with some affection.

### John Gee on *Yokefellow* as Wife

An obscure passage in the letters of Paul provides the occasion for this discussion. The King James Version renders the passage: “And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3). Many early Christians understood this passage to be a reference to Paul’s wife, whom he seems to have left in Philippi. This understanding was lost over time. How and why this came about deserves some explanation.

#### History of the Word

The Greek term translated by the King James translators as “yokefellow” is σύζυγος, which derives from two elements, σύν “with, together” and ζύγον “yoke.”<sup>29</sup> It refers to something “yoked together, paired, united, esp[ecially] by marriage.”<sup>30</sup> But etymology (breaking the word into constituent components) and definitions of the term in dictionaries and lexica can tell only part of the story. What is more useful for determining the meaning of a term is the history of the usage of a term.

In classical Greek the term σύζυγος could be used to refer to an ordinary companion. For example, in discussing a pair of young men (νεανία), Iphigenia asks a herdsman, “What was the name of the stranger’s companion (ξυζύγω)?”<sup>31</sup> A sycophant in Aristophanes’s

29. See Liddell and Scott et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1670; G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 1278; Delling, “σύζυγος,” 748-50; Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 954; Henri Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (1829; repr. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1954), 8:1012.

30. Liddell and Scott et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1670; Delling, “σύζυγος,” 748-49.

31. Euripides, *Iph. taur.* 250.

*Pluto* claims: “If I get a partner (σύζυγον), even if disreputable, I will dare to bring this mighty god to justice, for openly, even though alone, destroying the democracy without persuading the city council or the assembly.”<sup>32</sup>

There is, however, another way that the term σύζυγος was used in classical Greek. Even as early as Euripides, it was used as the term for “spouse.”<sup>33</sup> In Euripides’s *Alcestis*, Alcestis wonders to Admetus: “What sort of wife (συζύγου) will your own father get?”<sup>34</sup> Admetus later tells Alcestis: “Does it not hurt me more than all such to have sinned against a wife (συζύγου) like you?”<sup>35</sup>

The use of σύζυγος as “spouse” is the only usage preserved in the Septuagint. A textual variant in the Septuagint version of Ezekiel 23:21, instead of “and I will visit the iniquity of your youth, which you did in Egypt, in your lodging, to whom belonged the breasts of your youth,” has “I will visit the iniquity of your youth, in which you made Egypt your spouses (συζύγους) because of the breasts of your youth.”<sup>36</sup> In 3 Maccabees the results of a decree was the breaking up of weddings: “Their husbands (συζυγεῖς), their necks wound in ropes rather than wreaths, in the prime of youth, instead of joy and youthful amusement, spent the rest of the days of their wedding in lamentations seeing hell already lying at their feet.”<sup>37</sup> Otherwise, the term does not occur in the Septuagint.<sup>38</sup> In the pseudepigrapha, it is also used to mean “wife”: “Therefore my children, do not pay heed to the beauty of women, neither worry about their deeds, but go forth in singleness of heart, in the fear of the Lord, and spend your time in good works and in study and in your herding until the Lord give you a wife (σύζυγον) of

32. Aristophanes, *Plut.* 945.

33. Liddell and Scott et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1670; Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 954.

34. Euripides, *Alc.* 314.

35. Euripides, *Alc.* 341-42.

36. In *Ezekiel*, ed. Joseph Ziegler, Septuaginta 16.1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 195.

37. 3 Maccabees 4:8 (author’s translation).

38. Delling, “σύζυγος,” 749.

his choosing, lest you suffer as I.”<sup>39</sup> This is the Jewish use of the term that would have served as a background to the understanding both of Paul and those who read his letter.

The understanding of σύζυγος as a wife or spouse was preserved in the church fathers. Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235), referring to the gnostic cosmogony in which everything is in male and female pairs, says: “The Father alone begat without a mate (ἄζυγος). She [Sophia] wished to imitate the Father and beget apart from her spouse (συζύγου).”<sup>40</sup> Epiphanius says of Simon Magus, “His fornicating spouse (τὴν δέ σύζυγον) they have dared to claim was the Holy Spirit.”<sup>41</sup> Gregory of Nyssa exhorts, “Let the ethical and physical philosophy become ever the companion (σύζυγος) to the higher life along with friendship and the common life.”<sup>42</sup> So for Christian authors writing in Greek, the term principally was used in the meaning of “spouse” rather than the generic “companion.”

The persistence of usage of the term σύζυγος as “spouse” has been so pronounced throughout the history of Greek that it survives into Modern Greek as the standard term for spouse.<sup>43</sup> The term has never been known to be used as a personal name,<sup>44</sup> so interpretations that take it to be such are dubious.<sup>45</sup>

39. *Testament of Reuben* 4:1 (author’s translation).

40. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.30, in PG 16.3:3239. The same phrase occurs in Hippolytus, *Haer.* 31.4, in PG 16.3:3242.

41. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 1.2.21.2, in PG 41:288.

42. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, in PG 44:336-37.

43. “ὁ ἐνωμένος μεῖ ἄλλον μεῖ τό δεσμό τοῦ γάμου (one united with another by the bond of marriage)”; Harry Sakellariou, *Νέο Λεξικό Δημοτικῆς* (Athens: Σιδέρη, 1981), 1139; *Divry’s New English-Greek and Greek-English Handy Dictionary*, ed. G. C. Divry and C. G. Divry, rev. ed. (New York: Divry, 1978), 204, 445; Niki Watts, *Oxford Greek Mini Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 255, 579.

44. Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 954; Delling, “σύζυγος,” 749.

45. Some of these have been gathered in *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983), 689 n. a. Others include Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:297; Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Eric D. Huntsman, and Thomas A. Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 243.

The term σύζυγος, however, has not just been used in Greek but has been borrowed into other languages. When one language borrows a term from another, it is usually because the language borrowing finds it useful in some way. While the adopted term may have many different meanings in the original language, the language borrowing it will generally use it with only a specific meaning.

The Greek term is borrowed directly into Coptic and used in the meaning of “spouse” or “consort.” The most extensive use of the term comes in the *Pistis Sophia*, where it is frequently used clearly in the meaning of “spouse.”<sup>46</sup> The term is also borrowed from Greek into Syriac (a Christian version of Aramaic), as *zawgo’*, meaning “yokefellow, companion, wife,”<sup>47</sup> and *sūzūgīya’*, a term for “union.”<sup>48</sup> Because Aramaic is a Semitic language and is based on trilateral roots, the shortened form looks like a trilateral root (\**zwg*) and can be treated like a trilateral root even if it is not originally one. The shortened form is based on the term for “yoke” and provides a generic term that allows a distinction to be drawn between a *bar zawgo’* son of the yoke or “husband” and a *bat zawgo’* daughter of the yoke or “wife.”<sup>49</sup> Syriac speakers then, since the term looks like a trilateral root, treated it as such and used it verbally.<sup>50</sup> In the form *zūg* it was also used in the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud as a term for “couple, pair, set” and “partner, equal, match, counterpart.”<sup>51</sup> In the form *zūgā’*, it meant “match, wife,”<sup>52</sup> and in the form *zeweg*, it was a term for “marriage.”<sup>53</sup>

46. *Pistis Sophia* 1:29, 31-32, 39.8, 41.18, 48.11, 50.14; 2:93.

47. J. Payne Smith, ed., *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 111.

48. Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 364.

49. Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 111-12.

50. As a denominative Pael verb, *zaweg* meant “to join together, unite in marriage”; with an Aphel (causitive) verb, *’azweg* meant “to couple, join with another”; and as an Ethpaal (reflexive) verb, *’ezdaweg* meant “to be joined together, united in marriage, marry.” Smith, *Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, 111.

51. Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996), 383.

52. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 384.

53. Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 383.

From Syriac,<sup>54</sup> it passed into Arabic by the Abbasid period (AD 750–1543) as *zawj*, meaning “spouse,” “husband,” “wife,” “pair,” “companion,”<sup>55</sup> a meaning that it retains in modern standard Arabic.<sup>56</sup>

So not only was σύζυγος a standard term for “spouse” in ancient Greek long before Paul’s day, and one used as such by other Christian authors down to the present day, but it was so well known in Greek as a term for “spouse” that that remained the major meaning of the term when borrowed into other languages.

In Philippians 4:3 the noun σύζυγος is paired with an unusual adjective as well. This deserves some consideration. The adjective that modifies σύζυγος in Philippians, γνήσιος, has “a very affectionate nuance,”<sup>57</sup> and with “women—mothers and wives”—it has “a clear nuance of love”<sup>58</sup> and thus is properly rendered “dear.”<sup>59</sup>

### Versional Considerations

The translation of the New Testament into various languages can sometimes indicate how the term was understood by Christians at the time it was translated. The Coptic versions, both Sahidic and Bohairic, date to the second through fourth centuries<sup>60</sup> and simply borrow the Greek term into Coptic without a translation. But we have seen that the Coptic understanding of the term was “consort” or “spouse.” While the Sahidic version was standardized in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the Bohairic by

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54. Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998), 20–22, would like to minimize the impact of Syriac on the transmission of Greek into Arabic. The Syriac influence is clear in this case.

55. Edward W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1867), 1:1266–67.

56. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 4th ed. (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1979), 447. As in Syriac, in Arabic the noun and its supposed root also developed into a verb, though not using the same verbal forms as Syriac. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1266–67; Wehr, *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 447–48.

57. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 296.

58. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 297.

59. Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 296–99.

60. Tito Orlandi, “Coptic Literature,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. Birger A. Pearson and James E. Goehring (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 53.

the ninth,<sup>61</sup> it is not clear that an understanding of the term *syzygos* was preserved, as it appears to drop out of usage otherwise by the fourth century.

The Syriac version renders σύζυγος as *bar zawgo'*, which is masculine, indicating that the Syriac translators in the fourth century did not understand the text to refer to Paul's spouse.

The Latin Vulgate renders σύζυγος as *conpar*, meaning primarily "equal, companion," and secondarily "spouse, consort, mate."<sup>62</sup> The Vulgate was prepared by Jerome, "a Christian ascetic who positively delighted in drawing contrasts between the mediocre life of the average clergyman [who at the time was married] and the spiritual heights achieved by the monk."<sup>63</sup> Jerome had been a monk in the Syrian desert<sup>64</sup> and proselyted for asceticism,<sup>65</sup> including translating many works promoting asceticism and the monastic life.<sup>66</sup>

The versions are split on their interpretation of the passage. Coptic favors "spouse." Syriac favors "companion." Latin is ambiguous. In sum, the versions are of little assistance here.

### Grammatical Considerations

Grammatically, the term σύζυγος is both masculine and feminine.<sup>67</sup> Presumably, the treatment of the adjective attached to the term γνήσιος might give some indication of the understanding of the original writer. In Attic Greek we would expect that the feminine form of the adjective would be declined according to the first

61. Orlandi, "Coptic Literature," 53-54.

62. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), 386; *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 372; *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1906-12), 3:2004-5.

63. David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 56.

64. Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht: SPECTRUM, 1950), 4:213-14; Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 56.

65. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 62-63.

66. Quasten, *Patrology*, 4:231, 237-38.

67. Liddell and Scott et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1670.

declension<sup>68</sup> and thus be found in the vocative as γνήσια,<sup>69</sup> rather than the form γνήσιε that appears in the text. Attic Greek also has a class of adjectives in which the feminine and masculine forms are identical and are both declined according to the second declension.<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, in Koine the vocative does not work as it does in Attic,<sup>71</sup> so we might not expect this example to conform to Attic grammar. There is, however, a more direct and serious complication. Not only was “the so-called Attic second declension . . . dying out in the Hellenistic vernacular,”<sup>72</sup> but the feminine form of the adjective changed, often conflating with the masculine forms.<sup>73</sup> This would lead us to expect γνήσιε for the feminine vocative form, and, as we shall see, several early Christian commentators who were native speakers of Greek took this passage to be the feminine form. To these we now turn.

### Interpretive Considerations

The earliest Christian commentators understood this passage to refer to Paul’s wife. Both Clement of Alexandria<sup>74</sup> and Origen<sup>75</sup> take this term to mean “spouse.” Clement of Alexandria’s discussion of the passage deserves to be quoted in context:

Some say that marriage is fornication and teach that it was handed down by the devil. They proudly say that they are imitating the Lord, neither marrying nor owning anything in the world, boasting rather that they understand the Gospel better than others. . . . There is nothing virtuous about abstinence from marriage if it does not arise from the love of God. Actually Paul, the blessed, says about those

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68. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §286.

69. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §287. That γνήσιος is in this class of adjective is indicated by Liddell and Scott et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 354.

70. Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §289.

71. Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, §§146–47.

72. Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, §44.

73. Blass and Debrunner, *Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, §59.

74. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.53.1, in PG 8:115.

75. Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 1.1, in PG 14:839.

who abhor marriage: “In the last days some will apostatize from the faith, heeding deceiving spirits and the teachings of demons, forbidding to marry, and to abstain from foods” (1 Timothy 4:1, 3). And again, he says: “let no one of you disqualify you by demanding humiliation and the harsh treatment of the body” (Colossians 2:18, 23). The selfsame author writes “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek a divorce. Are you divorced? Do not seek a wife” (1 Corinthians 7:27). And again: “Let each have his own wife lest Satan tempt you” (1 Corinthians 2:5). How so? Did not the righteous of old gratefully partake of the creation? They begat children while married, exercising self-control. To Elijah, for example, the ravens brought food, bread and meat; and Samuel the prophet to whom was left the thigh, from which he had eaten, he brought and gave to Saul to eat. Those who say that they excel them in civility and life are not comparable with them in practice. So, “let not him who does not eat exercise authority over him who does and let not him who eats condemn him who does not eat for God has accepted him” (Romans 14:3). But even the Lord says of himself: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say he has a devil; the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say: behold the man is a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and a sinner” (Matthew 9:18-19). Or do they even disapprove of the apostles? For Peter and Philip begot children? Philip even married off his daughters. Paul did not hesitate to address his own spouse in a certain epistle (Philippians 4:3) whom he did not bring with him for the convenience of his ministry. He says therefore in a certain epistle: “Do we not have authority to lead around a sister or wife, like the rest of the apostles?” (1 Corinthians 9:5). On the one hand, they particularly in their ministry, approaching their preaching without distraction, took around their wives, not as wives, but as sisters, being ministers with

them to deal with housewives, through whom the teaching of the Lord blamelessly penetrated the women's quarters.<sup>76</sup>

So Clement uses this passage to demonstrate that Paul was married as one example among several to combat the notion that Christians had to be celibate. He also compares the choice of marriage to dietary choices, asserting that in either case one should not be condemned for one's choice.

Clement brings the issue up because certain Christians in the second century, notably Tatian, began to regard "all sexual union, whether within or outside marriage, as 'fornication.'"<sup>77</sup> And therefore marriage was seen as sinful. Earlier in the second century, Christians had argued that they were good citizens because they got married and raised families.<sup>78</sup> Clement saw the need to respond to Tatian and others such as the Encratites.

Clement's student and successor, Origen, writes of Philippians 4:3: "Truly free is he who comes to Christ through pure chastity without a wife; he, however, who is shown to be the servant of Christ, yet serves with complete virtue. Therefore Paul, as some relate, was called while in possession of a wife, about whom he spoke when he wrote to the Philippians: 'Therefore I ask you, genuine match, to help those women,' who since he was set free from her by mutual agreement, called himself the servant of Christ."<sup>79</sup> Origen does not give this as his own understanding but recognizes that some Christians taught that Paul was married and that this passage referred to his wife.

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76. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.49-53, in PG 8:1152-57. I have inserted the references to scriptural quotations into the text. The translation in Mark J. Edwards, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), 280, is unnecessarily ambiguous.

77. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 104.

78. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 98-101.

79. Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 1:1, in PG 14:839: "Paulus ergo, sicut quidam tradunt, cum uxore vocatus est; de quia dicit ad Philippenses scribens: Rogo etiam te, germane compare, adjuva illas: qui quoniam ab ipsa ex consensus liber effectus est, servum se nominat Christi."

Both Clement and Origen were native speakers of Greek who taught Greek in Alexandria and knew their Greek well. Origen, furthermore, was a self-imposed ascetic, which might have been why he did not claim the interpretation of the passage as his own opinion. “Though Origen was willing to accept the presence of married Christians in the Church, it is clear that his deepest instinct was to view them as second-class citizens.”<sup>80</sup>

Tertullian, writing to his wife asking her not to remarry if he dies, provides an oblique reference to Philippians 4:3 claiming that marriage is permitted because of the weakness of the flesh<sup>81</sup> but claims that abstinence from all sexual relations is preferable.<sup>82</sup> The oblique reference provides an implicit understanding that the passage referred to Paul’s wife. Tertullian was married himself, but after he became a Montanist (and his reference to Philippians 4:3 comes after he became a Montanist), he adopted the ascetic beliefs of the Montanists.

By the fourth century, this interpretation had fallen out of favor with Christian leaders. The church authors rejected the favorable view of marriage of Clement of Alexandria. “Tertullian, Cyprian, and Origen, each in his own way, articulated an ascetic vision that reflected significant features of the ancient encratite tradition. While accepting marriage as permissible, these writers approached the topic of celibacy and marriage from within the basic encratite framework that associated sexuality with sin and linked salvation with sexual purity. As a result, they inevitably supported a hierarchy that relegated married Christians to the lowest rung of salvation.”<sup>83</sup> Tertullian and Origen are at least honest in showing that Christians interpreted this text as referring to Paul’s wife and do not try to evade that fact. Those who followed them, however, found ways to reinterpret the passage. There is,

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80. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 127.

81. Tertullian, *Ux.* 1.4.

82. Tertullian, *Ux.* 1.3.

83. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 127–28.

however, an exception. Eusebius quotes Clement of Alexandria to show that Peter, Philip, and Paul were married.<sup>84</sup>

Theodoret of Cyrus takes the passage very differently than his predecessors: “Now some have unthinkingly understood the *syzygon* to be the wife of the apostle, not paying attention to the things written in the epistle to the Corinthians that he reckoned himself among the unmarried. . . . Therefore he calls him *yokefellow* who took upon himself the yoke of piety.”<sup>85</sup> One notes, however, that Theodoret was raised and educated in the monasteries near Antioch.<sup>86</sup> He had no normal family life. He was not overly literal in his readings of scripture,<sup>87</sup> which gave him the latitude to interpret the scriptures however he might desire. He was bilingual in Greek and Syriac<sup>88</sup> and was active at the time when the Syriac version of the New Testament was translated, a translation that deliberately excluded the possibility of taking Philippians 4:3 as a reference to Paul’s wife.

John Chrysostom says about this passage, “Some say that he addresses his wife here, but it is not so, but a certain wife, or the husband of one of them.”<sup>89</sup> Chrysostom’s treatment of the interpretation is interesting because he admits that the interpretation is current but basically grabs at straws trying to dismiss it. It is also predictable since Chrysostom was an extreme ascetic.<sup>90</sup>

So a change in the interpretation of this verse occurred in the third century. A number of factors figured into this change. The first and most prominent was the rise of asceticism and the denigration of marriage. This reached an extreme by the end of the fourth century when the monk Jovinian was condemned as a heretic for

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84. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.30.1.

85. Theodoret, *Ep. Phil.* 4.3; alternate translation in Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 280.

86. Quasten, *Patrology*, 3:536.

87. Quasten, *Patrology*, 3:539.

88. Theodoret, “Prolegomena,” trans. Blomfield Jackson, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3:2.

89. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Phil.* 13.2-3, in PG 62:279.

90. Quasten, *Patrology*, 3:424-25.

having the temerity to teach that “virgins, widows, and married women, once they have been washed in Christ, are of the same merit, if they do not differ in other works.”<sup>91</sup> A second is perhaps the use of the term by heretical gnostics in their cosmogonies. Whatever the cause of the change in understanding of Philippians 4:3 between the earliest Christians and those who came later, the change is clear and significant.

### Summary

Paul’s usage of *σύζυγος* in Philippians 4:3 follows the common understanding of the day and of earlier Jewish usage as a word for “spouse.” This interpretation fits with the grammatical usage of Koine Greek. The common understanding is shown not only by Greek usage but by the meaning of the term when it was borrowed by languages in contact with Koine Greek. The earliest Christian interpreters understood Philippians 4:3 as referring to Paul’s wife, but later Christian authors, who rejected marriage and were inclined to remake Paul in their own image, rejected the notion that Paul was married and reinterpreted the passage, both in translations they made and in the commentaries they wrote, as referring not to Paul’s wife but to someone (anyone) else.

The King James Version of Philippians 4:3 should read: “And I intreat thee also, dear wife, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life.” The earliest Christian authors, who knew their Greek well, so understood it, and so should we.

### Joint Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been twofold: (1) to discuss the evidence regarding Philippians 4:3 with respect to Paul’s unnamed addressee and (2) to demonstrate how evidence can be used. With respect to the first question, if Paul were a fourth-century-BC native

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91. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 26.

Athenian writing in classical Greek, we would say that the grammatical evidence for Philippians 4:3 clearly indicates that γνήσιε σύζυγε is masculine by form, and thus Paul would have had in mind a fellow missionary who was also a male. Since Paul was a first-century-AD Jew from Tarsus writing in Koine Greek, the grammatical evidence is less clear. If he were referring to a male companion, the question of why he might have used a word that is commonly employed to refer to a spouse is not resolved. It is equally certain that some patristic authors whose native language was Greek picked up on the interpretation of the word σύζυγε and either failed to note the gender of the adjective preceding it or did not understand the form as determining the gender. Therefore, following the line of reasoning of some patristic authors, the meaning “wife” was possible for some. When discussing the early apostles who were married, scholars sometimes include Paul in the list of married leaders, perhaps on the basis of the passage in question.

It is certain that later views on marriage—particularly asceticism with regard to marriage and Paul’s statements on women in 1 Corinthians—began to influence the discussion of whether or not Paul was married or advocated marriage. Because marriage eventually began to be viewed negatively in some Christian circles, it is not unreasonable to suppose that it may have shaped the way the evidence concerning Paul’s potential marriage was understood. At certain times there were groups of Christians who openly accepted the idea that Paul was married while at other times those Christians who thought such things were denounced. This, however, may be venturing into the larger question of whether or not Paul was ever married rather than the question of whether Philippians 4:3 mentions Paul’s wife.

This paper has also addressed the wider concern of scholarship and how evidence is weighed and considered. Rarely is the evidence so clear as to permit precise and undeniable claims, and all types of historical evidence must be used critically. On the one hand, the semantic range of meaning for the word translated as “wife” would indicate that such a translation was natural and expected in

some instances. At the same time, contemporary usage shows that it could have several different meanings apart from “wife,” much like the modern English word *companion*. Additionally, many early Christian commentators discussed Paul’s marriage, but it seems unlikely that they had access to any sources on this matter beyond those available to us, and therefore their conclusions are little better than our own. While it would have been patently obvious to both Paul and his audience at Philippi whether he was addressing his wife, the information available to us at this time does not allow an unambiguous reconstruction of events.

Obviously one of us is right and the other is wrong even though at our present state of knowledge we cannot know which is which. We are willing to risk being wrong. We can do so because we are not fourth-century encratite monks holding up Paul as some sort of ascetic ideal. We do not think that married individuals are somehow second-class citizens of the kingdom of God. We are not trying to gain power for ascetics in ecclesiastical office. Whether Paul addressed his wife in Philippi is for us an interesting historical footnote, not some sort of vital saving doctrine. In the end, we can agree to respectfully disagree on whether Paul was referring to his wife in Philippians 4:3.

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