

# The meaning of the word γαμῶ in Lk 14:20; 17:27; Mk 12:25 and in a number of early Jewish and Christian authors

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## Abstract

*In modern Greek the word γαμῶ means exclusively “to have sexual contact”, and not “to marry”. In his work Opera Minora Selecta: Epigraphie et antiquité grecques (Amsterdam, 1989, V, 417-421) the epigraphist Louis Robert shows that this special meaning of the word has to be assumed in a number of classical texts. On the basis of Robert’s study, this article discusses whether this meaning is also possible in the case of a number of New Testament texts (Lk 14:20; 17:27; Mk 12:25) and texts from Enoch, Philo, Athenagoras and especially Clement.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The famous epigraphist Louis Robert (1989, V:417-421), in connection with a whole series of smaller texts about the inscriptions from Ephesus, wrote a note entitled, “Une autre épigramme de Rufin ou l’” utilité du Grec moderne” in which he wanted to show that sometimes the meanings certain words have in modern Greek also existed in classical times. Of interest to him is that the meaning of the word γαμῶ in modern Greek, where it means exclusively “to have sexual contact” (βινῶ),<sup>2</sup> has also to be

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<sup>2</sup> This is the case according to the *Dictionary of Modern Greek*, published by the Academy of Athens; though the word βινῶ cannot be found in this dictionary. In Liddell-Scott it is one of those words which are prudishly translated only in Latin: *inire, coïre*, in other words “to have sex”. The *Thesaurus*

assumed in a number of classical texts. Robert begins his article with a discussion of a poem of Rufinus (*Anthologia Graeca* v.94), a poet from the time of Hadrian. In the Loeb edition it is translated in this way:

Thou hast Hera's eyes, Melite, and Athene's hands,  
The breasts of Aphrodite, and the feet of Thetis.  
Blessed is he who looks on thee, trice blessed he who hears thee talk;  
A demigod he who kisses thee, and a god he who takes thee wife.

The last line – ἡμίθεος δ' ὁ φιλῶν, ἀθάνατος δ' ὁ γαμῶν – obviously concerns the point under discussion. The poet is under the spell of the beauty of Melite. He writes about her also in a pair of other poems: in *Anthologia Graeca* v.15 he wonders where Praxiteles and Polycleitus are in order that they may capture her beauty in stone; and in *Anthologia Graeca* v.36 he compares her with two other beauties, and himself with Paris who must pass judgment. For Rufinus Melite is special, at least for as long as the evening lasts: he still meets many other women who charm him and are well disposed towards him, marrying Melite is not an option for him. In our poem, he describes Melite from close up. One sees how he looks at her: at her eyes, her hands, her breasts, and her feet. How marvellous it is to see her, still more beautiful to hear her; you are a demigod if you kiss her and immortal ... if you have sex with her.

Robert discusses a number of other classical texts in which this meaning must be assumed from the context: Ps-Lucianus, *Lucius or the Ass*, 32: “he (= the ass) saw a woman...he knocked her down on the road and tried to make love to her (ἀνατρέψας γαμῆν ἐβούλετο): in some papyri with magic texts; in scholia on Sophocles and Aristophanes; in Callimachus, *Hymn (IV) to Delos*, 240: “And Hera said to her: O shameful creatures of Zeus, may you all have sex (γαμέοισθε) in secret and bring forth in darkness ... amid the desolate rocks.”<sup>3</sup>

In this article I want to show that in the New Testament, too, there are a number of texts which gain in meaning if one understands the word γαμῶν as “to have sexual contact”. The clearest example is Lk 14,20: “γυναικῶν ἕνεκα and therefore I

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*Linguae Graecae* of Stephanus gives as second meaning of γαμῶν “illicito concubito rarius dixerunt veteres, saepissime recentiores.”

<sup>3</sup> And in a small number of texts from Clement of Alexandria which I have selected more systematically and put together at the end of this article.

cannot come.” This is a quotation from the parable of the great dinner as told in Luke. When the banquet is ready, those invited first all make excuses. These are enumerated in a set of three: “the first said: I have bought a piece of land ...; the second said: I have bought five yoke of oxen ...; again another said: γυνῶικα. This last excuse is a big puzzle.<sup>4</sup>

I want to quote two exegetes who have recently published on this matter and who can represent the whole exegetical tradition. According to W Braun (1995:75), “It remains to be seen if the third man, the newly-wed, is an anomaly in Luke’s pattern of accentuating the business-minded character and wealth of the original guests. First impressions suggest so.”<sup>5</sup> And according to Th Söding (1996:71), “Ihre Gründe sind nicht einfach als Vorwände, als billige Ausreden oder glatte Lügen zu begreifen ... Die Begehung eines Ackers und die Inspektion eines Ochsespanns gehören in Palästina als letzter Akt zum Kaufgeschäft hinzu; und eine Hochzeit will ja nun wirklich gefeiert werden – der dritte ist ohnehin der einleuchtendste und sympathischste Grund.

Exegetically the question is how the three excuses can be understood as a sort of unit. Many exegetes cite Dt 20:1-9 as a text which could explain the strange combination.<sup>6</sup> That passage is about people who have been excused from participating in the holy war. However, in the exegesis it has also become increasingly clear that using this text has certain drawbacks: not only are many more excuses brought forward in Dt 20, but in Lk 14 the subject matter is not a war but a feast. Perhaps a better parallel text is to be found in Luke itself, namely Lk 17:26-30<sup>7</sup>: “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking, and marrying and being given in marriage

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<sup>4</sup> Clement’s (Stromateis III.12.90.4) explanation of this text is interesting: “The man who said, ‘I have married a wife and cannot come’ to the dinner offered by God was an example to expose those who were apostates to God’s command for pleasure’s sake ...” – it cannot be about a prohibition on marriage because otherwise – “... neither those who were righteous before the coming of Christ nor those who have married after his coming will be saved.”

<sup>5</sup> In an excursus Braun explains that marrying at that time was also an act of acquiring possession and that therefore the string of three excuses is homogeneous. Apart from this Braun knows (1995:78), by way of the studies of A Harrison (1968:7), *The law of Athens*, A Erskine (1990:26), *Hellenistic Stoa*, that γαμῶ at that time also had the meaning of “copula carnalis” (Harrison)/“sexual intercourse” (Erskine), but Braun does nothing further about this.

<sup>6</sup> Derrett (1970:126ff) is supposed to have done this first and he has gained many followers (see, among others, Sanders 1974:245-271; Massyngebaerde Ford 1984:102ff; Fitzmyer 1985:1056).

<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the two refusals in the Matthean version of the parable: “one went to his farm, another to his business” (Mt 22:5) can be referred to another text of Matthew, namely, Mt 13:44-45.

(ἐγάρμουν, ἐγαμίζοντο)<sup>8</sup> until the day Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed all of them. And likewise: just as it was in the days of Lot, they *were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building*, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulphur from heaven and destroyed all of them, so will it be on the day that the Son of Man reveals himself.” This is an eschatological text, which can be compared to the introductory sentence of the parable of the great dinner: “happy are those who will sit at the feast in the kingdom of God!” (Lk 14:15). Moreover, this text also deals precisely with those activities used as excuses by the people in the parable who are invited first. It is an enumeration of the “ordinary activities” of people: eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting and building, activities in which people engage continuously, and therefore it is but natural to include in the string also the alternative meaning of γαμῶ, active or passive, that is to say, to engage in sexual activities as man and as woman.<sup>9</sup> People are busy with their ordinary affairs and are not aware that judgment day is threateningly near.

This is the case also in the parable. The excuses of those invited first are connected with these same “ordinary” activities. They are engaged in the buying of land and animals and want to finalize the transactions: walking over the field and doing a follow-up check on the animals are a part of the deed of sale. It is therefore no longer possible to come to the feast on time. Similarly, a man says that he has had sexual contact with a woman: he now has to wait until evening in order to take a cleansing bath and by then it will be too late to come to the feast. Like the others, he has forgotten that he got an invitation. He could easily have waited until the next day. However, he has thought only of his own interests and does not know how much is at stake: attendance at the eschatological dinner itself.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, though this is somewhat less certain, one might ask whether the special meaning of γαμῶ is also implied in Mk 12:25<sup>11</sup> – “when people rise from the

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<sup>8</sup> In the parallel text of Mt 24:38 the same list is given.

<sup>9</sup> Thus it should not be translated with “marrying and being given in marriage”, because these are not activities in which people are engaged day in and day out.

<sup>10</sup> In itself this interpretation is, in a way, a development of Eta Linnemann’s suggestion: it is about activities which require only a short time. Because the third excuse is now no longer about “marrying” but about “having had sex”, with, in my opinion, the implication of a cleansing bath, it can now be said of all three excuses that they mean to ask only a temporary postponement (see Linnemann 1960:246-255).

<sup>11</sup> See also par Mt 22:30; Lk 20:36.

dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven”.<sup>12</sup> The text is a sentence from an answer of Jesus to the Sadducees. They want to tie up Jesus with an absurd case. Because of a levirate duty a woman has been successively married to seven brothers but she still bore no child. Their question to Jesus is: “In the resurrection, whose wife will she be?” (Mk 12:23). This seems to be a question about the possible marriage of this woman. Generally, this is the way the question is also understood in exegesis, because Jesus too speaks in his answer about “marrying” and “being given in marriage”.<sup>13</sup> My question is whether “having sexual contact” is not the rather more natural meaning. According to the answer of Jesus, the question of the Sadducees is absurd, because “in the resurrection”, that is to say, when people have risen from the dead, there would be no more talk of sex between a man and a woman – let alone of marriage. This presentation of matters can be compared to the favourite saying of Rab: “In the future world there is no eating nor drinking nor *propagation* nor business nor jealousy nor hatred nor competition, but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the divine presence, as it says, ‘And they beheld God, and did eat and drink’” (Ber. 17a).<sup>14</sup> The experienced presence of God fills people with an overflowing goodness and makes every form of desire superfluous.

In the gospel texts there is, moreover, a comparison with the situation of the angels in heaven. The texts therefore refer (as in a reverse mirror) to the Genesis story concerning the sexual contact between the angels<sup>15</sup> and the beautiful terrestrial women (Gn 6:1-4). This myth comes up very often in Jewish texts more-or-less contemporary with the gospel texts. The words used to describe these events fit in with the Bible text, but they also elaborate on them: the angels have left heaven; they have slept with the women; they have defiled themselves; they have made children

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<sup>12</sup> See also the explanation of Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis*, III.12.87.2): “If anyone ponders over this answer about the resurrection of the dead, he will find that the Lord is not rejecting marriage, but is purging the expectation of physical desire in the resurrection.”

<sup>13</sup> The best and most elaborate commentary can be found in Davies & Allison (1997:220-234).

<sup>14</sup> The biblical quotation at the end is Ex 24:11, i e, from the story of the epiphany of God to Moses and the 70 elders at Sinai.

<sup>15</sup> They are called “Sons of God” in Gen 6:2, 4; in the tradition this became “angels”, see 1 Enoch 6:2; Jubilees 4:22; 5:1-11; 1Q Apocryphon Genesis 2:1; Lk 20:36.

(see 1 Enoch 6-7; Jubilees 4:22; 5,1; T Reuben 5:6).<sup>16</sup> What is particularly interesting here is that, in the Greek text of 1 Enoch 106:14, among other terms the word ἔγημον is also used: “they intermingled with women and they sinned with them and they married/had sexual contact (with some of them) and they begot children by them, who were not spirits but physical (people)” (for the Greek text, see Denis 1970: 44). It is written in 2 Baruch 56:14 that the angels who remained in heaven “restrained themselves”. And this is also the point of comparison with the people who, as the risen ones, will be in heaven: for they cannot die anymore (Lk 20:36) and therefore there is no more need to beget children and thus for sexual contact.

## CONCLUSION

Finally, let me report that I consulted the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* to check whether the special meaning of γάμω is also present in the surrounding Jewish and Christian literature: the LXX; the pseudoepigrapha which were published in Greek; Josephus, Philo, the apostolic fathers and the apologetic literature until Clement of Alexandria. As it turns out, the entry goes over hundreds of texts. After the most thorough selection possible, a very limited number of texts remain. Most of them are from Clement. I enumerate them in translation with a short account of the choice:

Philo (*De Cherubim* 92.4): “What is it that men admire and seek so eagerly? Freedom from the fear of punishment ..., drunkenness, tipsy rioting, routs and revels ... nightlong carouses, unseemly pleasure, *daylight chamberings*” (μεθημερινοὶ γάμοι – L S J translates this with “prostitution by daylight”). This is an enumeration of bad city habits. The γάμοι too have a place in this series. The addition of μεθημερινοί absolutely excludes the meaning “marriage”.

Athenagoras (*Legatio* 20.3 line 7): “They tell about Zeus that he put his father in chains ...and that he chased his mother Rhea because she had refused him her bed” (τον γάμον). This passage concerns a one-time event and not a marriage between Zeus and his Rhea. One could translate it with “marriage act”.

Clement (*Protrepticus* 4.54.6 line 4): “Arrangements were being made by the Athenians for his (=Demetrius) *sexual contact* (γάμος) with Athena, but he disdained the goddess, not being able to have sexual contact with her statue” (τὸ ἄγαλμα

<sup>16</sup> Here it is told that the angels change into men and appear to the woman when they have sexual contact with their husbands!

*The meaning of the word γαμῶ*

γῆμαι). The text plays with the nuances of meaning: marriage, marriage act and sexual contact.

Clement (*Protrepticus* 7.76.6 line 6; a quotation from Ion of Euripides 445-7; see also line 438):

You pay men penalties for *violent rapes* (βιαιῶν ... γάμων)  
You (=Apollo), Poseidon, and Zeus the Lord of heaven,  
Paying for wrongs should make your temples void.

The addition of βίαιος to γάμος excludes “marriage” as translation.

Clement (*Paedagogus* III.3.21.3 line 3.5): “Man throws nature out of gear. The men behave passively and in this way play the role of a woman, and the women behave like men when they let themselves *be possessed* in an abnormal way, *or when they have sexual contact with each other*” (παρα φύσιν γαμούμενάι τε καὶ γαμούσαι γυναικας). This passage concerns the well-known description from the letter to the Romans and other classical texts of condemnable sexual acts. Clement describes what women do wrong. For this he uses the verb γαμῶ. As a passive verb, I assume it would refer to anal sexual intercourse, and as an active verb express a form of homosexuality.

Clement (*Stromateis* II.20.118.7): “There is no absolute necessity for the passion of pleasure. It follows on certain natural needs – hunger, thirst, cold, *sexual drive* (γαμῶ). At any rate, if it were possible to drink or take food or produce children without pleasure entering in, then it would be shown that there was no other need of it.” Here we find an enumeration of ordinary, daily needs: hunger, thirst, cold, and sexual behavior (marrying is after all something more exclusive).

Clement (*Stromateis* III.2,11.1): “Xanthus in his book entitled *The Works of the Magi* says: ‘...their women are held in common, not forcibly or secretly, but by mutual agreement when one man wants to have sexual contact with another’s wife (θέλη γῆμαι ὁ ἕτερος τὴν τοῦ ἑτέρου).’” This does not concern marriage but the possession of women in common: by mutual agreement, a man may have sex with the wife of another.

Clement (*Stromateis* III.4.25.5): “We have spoken of the lawless communism in women held by Carpocrates. But ... we omitted one point. They say that Nicolaus

had a pretty wife. After the Savior's resurrection he was accused of jealousy by the apostles. He brought his wife into their midst and offered her to anyone who wanted to have sexual contact with her (τὴν γυναῖκα γῆμαι τῷ βουλομένῳ ἐπέτρεψεν).” This again refers to the possession of women in common. Nicolaus does not give up/renounce his wife (see *Stromateis* III.4,26: “I learn that Nicolaus had relations with no woman other than his wedded wife”), but he allows one of the apostles to have sexual contact with her.

Clement (*Stromateis* V.14.111.4): “Sophocles wrote without beating about the bush: Yes, Zeus had sex with the mother (Ζεὺς ἔγημε μητέρα) of this man without assuming another form ....” This refers to the sexual activity of Zeus, not to a marriage of Zeus. Further on he is also called an “adulterer” who has kept himself busy with the woman a whole night long (ἐθόρνυτο = to mount).

Clement (*Stromateis* VII.12.70.6): “Therefore he (= the gnostic) eats, he drinks and *he has sexual contact* (γαμεῖ) not because it is important but only because it is necessary.” This is again an enumeration of day-to-day matters: eating, drinking, sex.

Clement (*Stromateis* VII.12.78.5): “(With the gnostic) the acts and the thoughts are holy, when he eats, drinks or has sexual contact (γαμῶν), if reason at least holds sway, and also when he sees dreams. In this way he is always pure for prayer.” This is one and the same enumeration of day-to-day affairs: eating, drinking, having sex and seeing dreams.

There are all in all enough texts to make it likely that, also in the New Testament (interestingly enough precisely in Luke), this meaning is possible or perhaps even very probable.

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*The meaning of the word γαμῶ*

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