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Lk 17:34. Two in one Bed

I just saw in the B-Greek chat blog that someone had asked the question whether Luke's wording of two sleeping in the same bed at the time of the second coming of Christ implied that they were homosexuals. Luke's text is as follows:

Λέγω ὑμῖν, ταύτη τῇ νυκτὶ ἔσονται δύο ἐπὶ κλίνης μιᾶς, ὁ εἷς παραλημφήσεται καὶ ὁ ἕτερος ἀφεθήσεται.

The question was:

“Would a first century reader consider the masculines ὁ εἷς ... ὁ ἕτερος (in one bed) as a likely reference to homosexuality? What should be implied with the heteros and not allos? (In the next verses, the ones “grinding” are put in the feminine.)”

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The question is natural enough for an English reader, who wants to know what the Greek text means.

Prof Carl Conrad answered the question as follows:

“That’s been argued by some, but I don’t think it’s a legitimate assumption. Multiple beds until relatively recent historical times were a luxury and beds were commonly shared without any special association with homosexuality”.

Prof Conrad is right in rejecting this hypothetical interpretation. But his explanation is wrong. It is not a question of bed scarcity that is responsible for Luke's wording but Greek grammar.

In Greek when speaking of more than one person, where both sexes are represented, the rule is to use the masculine of all persons involved. This is what the feminists call “masculine language”. However, this is a fact. Thus, this text does not say that two men are sleeping in the same bed, but, what is natural for a Greek, two are sleeping in the same bed, i.e. a man with his wife.

In the very next verse, because the persons working at the mill belong to one sex, that is, they are both women, Luke, quite correctly adhering to Greek grammar, uses the feminine participle ἀλήθουσαι, etc.

This text, therefore, has nothing to do with homosexuality.

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This kind of thing is natural with words that are capable of referring to both sexes in contexts where representatives of both sexes may be presumed to be present. Such words include ἀδελφοί, πιστοί, Χριστιανοί, ἄνθρωποι and many others. A few examples are the following:

In his letters to the various churches Paul often addresses the recipients as ἀδελφοί (e.g. Rom 1:13; 8:12; 11:25; 12:1; 1 Cor 1:10; 11:33; 12:1; Gal 3:15; 4:12; 6:1; Eph 6:23; Phil 1:23; 3:1). Sometimes he addresses the believers as ἅγιοι (1 Cor 1:2; Eph 1:1; Col 1:2), sometimes as ἡγιασμένοι (1 Cor 1:2;), or as κλητοῖς ἁγίοις (1 Cor 1:2) or as πιστοί (Col 1:2: ἁγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς). So, too, ἄνθρωπος (Gal 6:1). In 1 Th 1:4 they are ἀδελφοὶ ἠγαπημένοι (similarly 1 Th 2:1, 9, 14: surely it was not only the men who suffered, the women partook of it, too). In Acts 11:26, when the pagans gave the followers of Jesus the nickname Χριστιανοί, the latter included not only men but also women. When we say οἱ κάτοικοι τῆς πόλεως ἐκείνης we do not single out the men, but refer to the women as well. Thus when a Greek says that Athens has five million inhabitants, the words “inhabitants” (Acc. κατοίκους) is masculine, but includes all the dwellers of Athens: men, women, and children! The gospels offer a great number of such instances, for example, on the word ἀδελφός.

I refrain from supplying more passages. This usage is ubiquitous. And by the way, no Greek reading these texts would ever think that they were addressed only to men! Every Greek knew and knows that such references apply as much to women as they do to men.