Simon Gathercole*

Ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν: A Note on 1 Cor 7,29 and the Semantics of Συστέλλω

Abstract:
This article seeks to clarify the meaning of the disputed phrase Ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν in 1 Cor. 7. It provides an overview of existing interpretations, and draws attention to some of their problems. The article also offers an account of the semantics of συστέλλω through wide-ranging coverage of its usage, and its near-synonyms, antonyms and accompanying adverbial phrases. These linguistic conclusions are applied to 1 Cor 7,29 and the best fit appears to be the sense that time between the Christ-event and the parousia is circumscribed or delimited or bounded, rather than necessarily short or shortened. This probably has implications for the qualitative nature of this καιρός, although 1 Cor. 7,29 itself does not provide much information there.

Zusammenfassung:
Dieser Artikel versucht, die Bedeutung der umstrittenen Aussage Ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν in 1. Kor. 7 zu klären. Er bietet einen Überblick über bisherige Interpretationen und weist auf einige ihrer Probleme hin. Der Artikel bietet außerdem eine Darstellung der Semantik von συστέλλω durch eine umfassende Darstellung seiner Verwendung sowie seiner Synonyme, Antonyme und begleitenden Adverbialphrasen. Diese linguistischen Schlussfolgerungen werden auf 1. Kor. 7,29 angewendet, und die passendste Interpretation scheint die Bedeutung zu sein, dass die Zeit zwischen dem Christus-Ereignis und der Parusie umschrieben, abgegrenzt oder begrenzt ist, anstatt notwendigerweise kurz oder verkürzt. Dies hat wahrscheinlich Auswirkungen auf die qualitative Natur dieses καιρός, obwohl 1. Kor. 7,29 selbst bietet dazu nicht viele Informationen.

Keywords:
συστέλλω, eschatology, parousia, Paul, 1 Cor 7, time

Stichworte:
συστέλλω, Eschatologie, Parusie, Paulus, 1Kor 7, Zeit

There has been little agreement about the meaning of the clause ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν in 1 Corinthians 7. This lack of consensus is partly understandable, because Paul's statement here is somewhat elliptical and enigmatic. It is the purpose of this note to remove at least some of the enigma. Initially, we will briefly survey previous interpretations, and after that give some attention to the semantics of the verb συστέλλω, which has not to my knowledge been studied in much detail. These two steps make it possible to clarify the meaning of 1 Cor. 7,29a in its immediate context and in its larger setting in 1 Corinthians 7.

1. Existing Interpretations

Approaches to 1 Cor. 7,29a can be divided into six main interpretations.[1]

* Corresponding author: Simon Gathercole, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge, West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9BS, UK: sjg1007@cam.ac.uk.

[1] I am not focusing much here on the meaning of καιρός, which, following Barr, I take to be a normal word for time, and one which is perfectly capable of bearing the sense of a period of time (cf. e.g. Mk 10,30; Heb 9,9;

First, we can note one historically important, but implausible option. According to Calvin and some following him, the καιρός in question is the short human life-span.[2] This has rightly not garnered any support in recent scholarship, where there is a consensus that the καιρός in 1 Cor. 7,29a is the interval between the Christ event on the one hand, and the parousia on the other.[3]

Secondly, then, some render ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν as "the time *is short*".[4] This is presumably treating the perf. pass. ptcp. as having an entirely stative meaning. This is possible, but there would have been much more straightforward and less ambiguous ways for Paul to express such a point, using adjectives such as ὀλίγος or μικρός or βραχύς, all of which are used by New Testament authors to describe small quantities of time.[5]

Thirdly, some give more attention to an implied verbal action. Thus the phrase could mean, effectively, "the time *has been shortened*".[6] Such an idea of God shortening the end-time has several parallels in eschatological contexts in apocalyptic literature. But again, συστέλλω is not an obvious choice. More straightforwardly, in similar contexts Mark, followed by Matthew, chose κολοβόω (Mk 13,20; Matt 24,22), and Ps.-Barnabas opted for συντέμνω (*Barn.* 4.3).[7] There are also several other Greek verbs which would have been clearer, such as βραχύνω, ἐλασσόω, ἐπιτέμνω, συντέμνω (cf. Rom 9,28) or μειόω. Paul expresses a similar idea to this interpretation of the phrase much more clearly in Rom 13,11.

These two interpretations can be broadly classified as "quantitative" interpretations, namely assessing the function of συστέλλω as meaning that time is reduced in quantity, and that the parousia is close at hand. As Wimbush puts it, "συνεσταλμένος affirms the

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Rev 12,12). See James Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (SBT; London, SCM, [2]1969), 43 and n. 1. Cf. e.g. Gottfried Hierzenberger, *Weltbewertung bei Paulus nach 1 Kor 7, 29-31. Eine exegetisch-kerygmatische Studie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1967), 32; Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [2]2003), 180; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians.* Anchor Bible Commentary (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 317; Paul D. Gardner, *1 Corinthians.* ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 347-348.

[2] John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 159; Cornelius à Lapide, *1 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1908), 164. I have not found a recent commentator taking this view.

[3] E.g. Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther.* EKK (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001), 2.171: "Die Zeit bis zur Parusie." C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1968), 176: "the time before the End".

[4] E.g. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (see n. 3), 2.171; also in translations, such as the KJV, NIV, NET (ESV: "very short").

[5] For ὀλίγος (cf. LSJ *ad loc.* IV.3), see e.g. 1 Pet 1,6; 5,10; Rev 12,12; 17,10; in prepositional phrases, 1 Tim 4,8; Jam 4,14; 1 Pet 5,12. For μικρός (cf. LSJ *ad loc.* II.1), see e.g. Jn 12,35; 13,33; 14,19. For βραχύς, see Lk 22,58; Ac 5,34; 27,28; Heb 2,9.

[6] E.g. James Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper, 1938), 92; Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (see n. 3), 176; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians.* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 579. In translations, see e.g. NASB, Weymouth NT. *TDNT* 7.596 and Bauer *ad* συστέλλω (1), with reference to Johannes Weiss, note the possibility of a *passivum divinum*. Similarly, L. Ann Jervis, *Paul and Time* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 130: "the time is contracted". Or again, Judith M. Gundry *Women, Gender, and Sex in the End-Time: Household Roles in 1 Corinthians 7.* WUNT (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 133, who takes it intransitively: "the appointed time has grown short". Cf. also Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 62 ("the time that contracts itself").

[7] For parallels including other non-Greek texts, see Jörg Baumgarten, *Paulus und die Apokalyptik*: *Die Auslegung apokalyptischer Überlieferungen in den echten Paulusbriefen.* WMANT (Verlag: Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), 222 n. 139-140; W.D. Davies & D.C. Allison, *Matthew 19-28.* ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3.351.

imminence of the end."[8] The next two interpretations do not focus on the imminence of the parousia, but rather identify see *qualitative* differences in the time before the end.

Fourthly, then, is the view that time is "foreshortened".[9] On this interpretation, the emphasis is on the *perspective* which can be adopted on the remainder of time. Fee connects verse 29 closely to verse 26, such that the present distress is evidence that time has been foreshortened. As Fee goes on to comment: "This does not so much mean that the final consummation is imminent (although in a sense that is always true for God's people) as that the future, which was set in motion by the event of Christ and the Spirit, has been 'shortened' so that it is now in plain view. And that will absolutely condition how one lives in the present. Paul's concern, therefore, is not with the *amount* of time they have left, but with the radical new perspective the 'foreshortened future' gives one with regard to the *present* age."[10] Here the emphasis is on the fact that, from Paul's point of view, the end appears close, or is in sight. It seems to me that this position is unlikely, however, because Paul's emphasis appears not to be on the subjective perception of time, but on a situation which demands that believers should take the attitudes set out in vv. 29b-31a.

A fifth approach is to understand 1 Cor. 7,29a to say that "time … has been compressed or contracted".[11] Here, the stress again lies on the qualitatively different character of the time remaining. Schrage and Hierzenberger were early proponents of the sense that here time is "zusammengedrängt".[12] Deming's argument for a similar point has been influential in English-language scholarship.[13] Barclay connects the compressed or contracted nature of the time with the "constraint" (ἀνάγκη) in 1 Cor. 7,26: in verse 29, Paul is defining "the present constraint" and "life mid-apocalypse".[14] "This special bracket of time is what Paul calls the καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος (7:29), an unparalleled expression which appears to suggest not that a longer period of time has been 'cut short' by subtraction, but that time (or opportunity) has been compressed or contracted."[15] Further on: "In 'compressed time,' these alternatives are rendered more urgent and stark… believers' investments are newly prioritized."[16] As Philips Wilson summarises the implication: "the instructions therefore are based not upon the shortness of time available but upon the changed quality of the old configuration of the cosmos, a quality which creates a new set of priorities."[17]

The difficulty with this line is that the meaning of glosses such as *compressed time* are unclear, and consequently the logical link between the nature of the time and attitudes enjoined in 1 Cor. 7,29b-31a is hard to identify. To be fair, of course, this may be

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[8] Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul, the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and Self-Understanding according to 1 Corinthians 7* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 40. Also *TDNT* 7.597, and Hierzenberger, *Weltbewertung bei Paulus* (see n. 1), 76.

[9] E.g. Brendan Byrne, *Paul and the Christian Women* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 23.

[10] Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians.* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 339, followed by David Garland, *1 Corinthians.* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 329, and Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary.* TNTC (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2018), 156.

[11] John Barclay, "Apocalyptic Allegiance and Disinvestment in the World: A Reading of 1 Corinthians 7:25-35", in *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination,* ed. B. Blackwell, J. Goodrich & J. Maston (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 257-274, here 260.

[12] Wolfgang Schrage, "Die Stellung zur Welt bei Paulus, Epiktet und in der Apokalyptik: Ein Beitrag zu 1Kor 7, 29-31", *ZThK* 61 (1964): 125-154, here 131; Hierzenberger, *Weltbewertung bei Paulus* (see n. 1), 32.

[13] Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (see n. 1), 179-180.

[14] Barclay, "Apocalyptic Allegiance" (see n. 11), 260.

[15] Barclay, "Apocalyptic Allegiance" (see n. 11), 260.

[16] Barclay, "Apocalyptic Allegiance" (see n. 11), 265.

[17] Annalisa Phillips Wilson, "Those 'in the Lord' Are Free: 1 Corinthians 7 and a Stoic Paradox", *JTS* 2025, 1–17 (16 n. 65). https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flaf043

unavoidable given Paul's brevity, and this reading is still appealing, even if it is hard to pin down with precision.

Finally, some have translated the phrase, "the time is …'limited'".[18] Here, the focus is rather on the *boundedness* of the time-period, i.e., that it is delimited or circumscribed or confined. Godet's comments can illustrate this position: "The apostle therefore means not that the present epoch will embrace a greater or fewer number of years, but that the character of the epoch is its being contained between precise limits which do not admit of its being extended indefinitely. These limits are, on the one side, the coming of Christ which took place recently, and on the other, His coming again, which may be expected at any hour, and which will be the close of the καιρός."[19]

This view has the advantage of being clear and easy to grasp, as well as making sense in the context. Before advancing a particular view or combination of views, however, it will be essential to examine συστέλλω more closely.

2. The Semantics of Συστέλλω

The basic sense of συστέλλω is *to make small* in some way. This sense may have its origins in the compounding of ξύν / σύν ("together, with") and στέλλω ("bring, fetch, put in order" ← IE **stel-* "put in order").[20] That is, some thing or things which are dispersed are brought together into a more compact or collected form. Be that as it may, the aim of the classification of meanings below is an attempt to provide a more rational account of the relations of different meanings, rather than simply listing them in a fairly random order as appears to happen in the lexica. The examples are taken promiscuously from different periods because the meanings appear to remain fairly consistent over time.

2.1. Συστέλλω and Quantitative Subtraction

To being with, we can note that, contrary to some assertions, συστέλλω can refer to quantitative reduction.[21] This is especially the case in technical contexts, such as in discussions of short and long vowels, or in financial matters:

> Aelius Dionysius, *Gramm.* α, 155 (ii CE):[22] "The word ἄπαν: Ionians *shorten* (συστέλλουσι) the *alpha*, as does Homer (*Il.* 20.156):
>
> ¯ ˘ ˘ | ¯ ¯ | ¯ || ˘ ˘ | ¯ ¯ | ¯ ˘ ˘ | ¯ ¯
>
> τῶν δ' ἄπαν ἐπλήσθη πεδίον καὶ λάμπετο χαλκῷ
>
> Atticans, on the other hand, *extend* (ἐκτείνουσι) the second *alpha*, and do the same in the word παράπαν."

[18] David I. Starling, *1 Corinthians.* EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2025), 182; similarly, Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (see n. 6), 579.

[19] F. Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians. Volume 1* (Edinburgh: T. &T. Clark, 1898), 375-376.

[20] See Robert Beekes, with Lucien van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1397-1398, for the Indo-European root, which survives into Armenian.

[21] *Contra* Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (see n. 1), 179-180 who states that it does *not* mean cut short in the subtractive sense.

[22] ἄπαν· οἱ μὲν Ἴωνες συστέλλουσι καὶ ὁ Ποιητὴς (*Il.* 20.156) 'τῶν δ' ἄπαν ἐπλήσθη πεδίον ...' οἱ δὲ Ἀττικοὶ ἐκτείνουσι τὴν ὑστέραν καὶ τὸ 'παράπαν' ὁμοίως. Cf. Phrynichus, *Ecl.* 80: "Πελαργός: the ignorant extend the alpha: *one should make it short* (δέον συστέλλειν)."

> *P.Amh.*2.70.1-3 (c. 115 CE):[23] "To Felix Claudius Vindex, most excellent Epistrategos, from the magistrates of Hermopolis. Since the governor Rutilius Lupus has ordered *most of the gymnasiarch's expenses to be reduced* (συσταλῆναι τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἀναλωμάτων τῆς γυμνασιαρχίας) ... "

Other, non-technical usages include numerical reduction, and the seasonal subsiding of the water in the Nile.[24] The problem with the interpretation of 1 Cor. 7,29 as referring to *shortened* time, then, is not a semantic one. Rather it is the other difficulties noted above which cause the problem.

2.2. Συστέλλω and Spatial Contraction (1): The Vertical ('Y') Dimension

There are also a number of senses which involve spatial, but not quantitative reduction. The first kind of spatial contraction consists of instances of *making vertically small*, as for example in Josephus's reference to Antipater:

> Josephus, *Ant.* 16.248 (16.8.4): "Whenever he (Antipater) walked along with his father (Herod), he endeavoured *to hunch and shorten himself* (συστέλλειν αὐτὸν καὶ καθαιρεῖν), so that he would not appear taller."

Here, needless to say, Antipater does not shrink in absolute height, but compacts himself in order not to incur his father's displeasure. The same contraction is probably in play in the semi-technical nautical sense of συστέλλειν ἱστία ('trimming' or 'shortening' sails), where the sail is lowered and the remaining material at the bottom folded over. This expression is used in Aristophanes (*Ran.* 999[25]) and in the Western text of Acts:[26]

> Ac. 27,15 *v.l.*: "The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind, so we gave way {to the blowing wind, *trimmed the sails* (συστείλαντες τὰ ἱστία)} and were driven along."

One metaphorical extension of the sense of vertical lowering is a reference to 'lowering' one's linguistic register, as for example where Philo says that speech varies …

> Philo, *Post.* 110: "… at one time *elevating itself* (αἴρων ἑαυτόν) to a lofty style, and at another time, on the contrary, *confining and humbling itself* (συνάγων τε καὶ συστέλλων)."

A more common usage of 'vertical' συστέλλω, however, is of humbling in the sense of humbling one's enemies (i.e. defeating them):[27]

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[23] For other financial examples, see Arius Didymus, *Phil. Sect.* 100,1; Plutarch, *Sept. sap. conv.* 150C; Dio Cassius 39.37.2, and, for papyrological examples, Moulton-Milligan *ad* συνστέλλω (*sic*).

[24] E.g. the sense of numerical reduction in Strabo, *Geog.* 7.3.13: "Be that as it may, although the Getae and Daci once attained to very great power, so that they actually could send forth an expedition of two hundred thousand men, *they now find themselves reduced to as few as forty thousand* (νῦν ὅσον εἰς τέτταρας μυριάδας συνεσταλμένοι τυγχάνουσι), and they have come close to the point of yielding obedience to the Romans." On the Nile, see Diodorus Siculus 1.41.2: "Consequently it is reasonable that the Nile *should be small and should diminish* (μικρὸν εἶναι καὶ συστέλλεσθαι) in the winter…".

[25] Compare the metaphorical use of the nautical imagery in Aristophanes, *Eq.* 432 and Plutarch, *Mor.* 128F.

[26] See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson [2]2005), 440 for the details: the NA[28] apparatus is not very informative at this point.

[27] Cf. Isocrates 12.230: "having a humbled attitude" (συνεσταλμένην ἔχων τὴν διάνοιαν).

> Jdg. 8,28a LXX: "And Midian *was humbled* (συνεστάλη) before the sons of Israel, and they did not continue *to lift up their heads* (ἆραι κεφαλὴν αὐτῶν)."
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> *1 Macc.* 5,3: "Judah waged war against the sons of Esau in Idumaea, against Akrabattene, because they were besieging Israel. And he struck them with a mighty blow, and *humbled* (συνέστειλεν) them and took their spoils."

This metaphorical usage became so conventionalised that it is probably more common than the literal, physical sense of lowering.[28]

2.3. Συστέλλω and Spatial Contraction (2): The Forwards/Backwards ('Z') Dimension

Secondly, συστέλλω can refer to the pulling back of something which extends forward:

> *Sir*. 4,31: "Do not let your hand be *stretched out* (ἐκτεταμένη) to receive and *withdrawn* (συνεσταλμένη) when paying back."[29]
>
> Achilles Tatius, *Leuc.* 8.1.5 (ii CE): "Damaging his fingers, *he just about managed to draw back his hand* (μόλις τὴν χεῖρα συνέστειλεν) as he screamed in pain."

In this category probably also belong cases where something which is advancing is kept back or restricted:

> Plutarch, *Sull.* 9.6 (i-ii CE): "Basillus's men had forced their way into the city, when a large unarmed crowd hurled stones and tiles from the roofs at them. So *they kept them from advancing further* (ἐπέσχον αὐτοὺς τοῦ πρόσω χωρεῖν), *and confined them against the wall* (καὶ συνέστειλαν εἰς τὸ τεῖχος)."
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> Soranus, *Gyn.* 3.41.5 (i-ii CE): "*The wedged-in piece of wool hinders the flux* (σφηνούμενον τὸ ἔριον συστέλλει τὴν ῥύσιν), but retains the discharged blood in the cavity."[30]

Following the meaning of 'pulling back', συστέλλω can therefore have the sense 'to withdraw' (intransitive) when used reflexively or in the middle/passive:

> *1 Macc*. 3,6: "*And the lawless drew back* (καὶ συνεστάλησαν οἱ ἄνομοι) for fear of him…"
>
> *Prot. Jam.* 25,1: "I, James, wrote this account in Jerusalem when the tumult arose on Herod's death, and *I took myself off* (συνέστελλον ἑαυτόν) into the wilderness."

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[28] For more quotidian 'humbling', see also Epictetus 1.11.28; Marcus Aurelius 1.17.3; Plutarch, *Alc.* 6.4.

[29] The reference here could be to the 'clenching' of the hand, but in the Achilles Tatius example it is obviously 'pulling back'.

[30] Cf. similarly, after the Nile had flooded, Pharaoh asked Moses to restore the river, and he *restrained the flow* (συστεῖλαι τὸ ῥεῦμα), according to Artapanus 3.29. Similarly, Diodorus Siculus in the passage quoted above contrasts the Nile being reduced in winter but flowing without hindrance in the summer.

> *3 Bar*. 9,1: "And *they having retired* (τούτων συσταλέντων), the night also fell, and at the same time came the chariot of the moon, along with the stars."

In the latter two cases, there is no deceleration and shift into reverse gear, but a simple withdrawal elsewhere.

2.4. Συστέλλω and Spatial Contraction (3): The Left/Right ('X') Dimension

Thirdly, and relatedly, the smallness can be of *width*. Therefore the active senses are 'to draw in', 'draw together', 'to confine':

> *3 Bar.* 8,2: "But the bird stood exhausted, *drawing in its wings* (συστέλλον τὰς πτέρυγας αὐτοῦ)."[31]

> Plutarch, *Them.* 29.3 (i-ii CE): "Similarly, when a tapestry is *spread out* (ἐκτεινόμενον μέν), you can see its patterns, but when it is *rolled up* (συστελλόμενον δέ), you cannot."[32]

> Hippocrates, *De prisca medicina* 22 (627): "For example, with your mouth *wide open* (κεχηνώς) you cannot draw fluid in; *but if you protrude and contract it* (προμυλλήνας δὲ καὶ συστείλας), compressing your lips, you will draw some up."

These all appear to be examples of something wide becoming narrower, again in space but not in quantity.

2.5. Συστέλλω and Spatial Contraction (4): Multi-Dimensional Contraction

Finally, we can note some examples of confinement or reduction which is not simply on a line. The first set are on a two-dimensional plane:

> Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 7/8.4=594a (iv BCE): "The snake grabs its prey and drags it forward until it has set it in a straight line all the way to the tail, and then *draws itself in and contracts itself into a small space* (συνάγει ἑαυτὸν καὶ συστέλλει εἰς μικρόν) in such a way that when it has *stretched out* (ἐκταθέντος) again the food it has swallowed has gone down."[33]

> Josephus, *Ant.* 14.74 (14.4.4): "Pompey made Jerusalem pay tribute to the Romans, took away those cities of Coele Syria which the inhabitants of Judaea had subdued, and put them under his Roman governor. So *he confined within its own limits* (ἐντὸς τῶν ἰδίων ὅρων συνέστειλεν) the whole nation, *which had elevated itself so high before* (ἐπὶ μέγα πρότερον αἰρόμενον)."

> Plutarch, *Ant.* 34.2 (i-ii CE): "This accomplishment, which became among the most celebrated, provided the Romans with full recompense for Crassus's calamities, and Ventidius *confined the Parthians again within the bounds of Media and Mesopotamia*

[31] Cf. e.g. Aristophanes, *Pax* 160: πτέρυγ᾽ ἐκτείνων.
[32] Plutarch's imagery here recurs in *Reg. et imp. apophth.* 15 [*Mor*. 185e-f]). See also Aristotle, *Aud.* 800a.
[33] Cf. also συστέλλω εἰς μικρόν in Plutarch, *Amatorius* (*Mor.* 754A).

(Πάρθους αὖθις εἴσω Μηδίας καὶ Μεσοποταμίας συνέστειλε) now that they had been mightily defeated in three consecutive battles."

Plutarch, *Arist.* 14.2 (i-ii CE): "Pausanias, on hearing this, and seeing at once that the camp of the Megarians was as good as hidden from view by the multitude of the enemy's javelins and arrows, and that *they themselves were huddled together in narrow quarters* (συνεσταλμένους αὐτοὺς εἰς ὀλίγον) …"

Plutarch, *Cam.* 34.5 (i-ii CE): "Since the Latins… *were confined in a small space* (ἐπ᾽ ὀλίγον συστελλόμενοι τόπον), they were forced to break out against the heavily armoured troops drawn up."

Plutarch, *Philop.* 4.5 (i-ii CE): "He would investigate … the experiences and shapes of a phalanx *when it is spread out and contracted again* (διασπωμένης καὶ πάλιν συστελλομένης) around streams or ditches or narrow paths … ."

Lucian, *Icar.* 12 (ii CE): "What you say is completely beyond belief and self-contradictory, for you told me just now that you had to look (sc. *from the sky above)* for the earth because it was *diminished* (ἐς βραχὺ συνεσταλμένην) by the intervening distance…"

Lucian, *Men*. 17 (ii CE): "My friend, when Aeacus measures the space [in Hades] for each person – he gives at most no more than a foot – *you have to be content to lie down confined to that measurement* (ἀνάγκη ἀγαπῶντα κατακεῖσθαι πρὸς τὸ μέτρον συνεσταλμένον)."

This sense of confinement is extremely common. There are also instances of three-dimensional condensing or contraction:

Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 6.12 (567a) (iv BCE): "The seal *can compress and draw itself in* (συνάγει δὲ καὶ συστέλλει ἑαυτήν), because it is soft and fleshy and its bones are cartilaginous."

Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 2 (Cas. 42b; Kaib. 16) (ii-iii CE): "The water near the mines around Mt. Pangaeum weighs 96 units per cup in the winter, but 46 in the summer; *the cold compresses it and increases its density* (συστέλλει δὲ αὐτὸ καὶ πυκνοῖ μᾶλλον τὸ ψῦχος)."

Galen, *Hyg.* 2 [128K] (ii CE): "Massage first *produces swelling* (ἐξαίρει) of the body and then *contracts and reduces* (συστέλλει τε καὶ καθαιρεῖ) it again."

Galen, *MM* 2 [120K-121K] (ii CE): "The heart has a capacity *by which it expands and contracts* (ᾗ διαστέλλεται καὶ συστέλλεται)."

There are probably three more or less distinct metaphorical extensions of this sense of 'contracting'.

(A) One is that of 'wrapping up' an (especially personal) object in something. When a body is wrapped in a shroud, it is, so to speak, 'tightened up', the shroud pressing closely against the skin:

Euripides, *Tro.* 376-379 (v BCE): "Those whom Ares took did not see any children; nor *were they clothed for burial* (πέπλοις συνεστάληαν) by the hands of their wives: they lie buried in foreign soil."

Lucian, *Imag.* 7: "And let Polygnotus also do the statue's clothing, which shall be of the most delicate texture, so that it not only *clings close* (συνεστάλθαι) where it should, but a great deal of it *wafts in the breeze* (διηνεμῶσθαι)."[34]

Hence – in the other New Testament use of the verb – when Ananias died, young men came and *wrapped up his body* (συνέστειλαν αὐτόν) and took him away (Ac. 5.6).

(B) Another is 'tensing up' – i.e. 'tightening up' in mind as well as in body:

Aristophanes, *Eccl.* 487-488 (v BCE):
"On top of that, *get yourselves ready for action*! (συστέλλου σεαυτήν)
Look about all around you!"

Aristophanes, *Vesp.* 422-424 (v BCE):
"So each of you, turn this way,
draw your spikes out and have at him,
ready to strike (ξυσταλείς) in good battle-array... ."

The meanings are not completely clear here, but these are the senses suggested by LSJ.

(C) The sense of physical confinement extends to a restricting or restraining of more abstract objects:

Plato, *Leg.* 3 (691d-e) (iv BCE): "First, a god was taking care of you. Foreseeing what was to come, *he limited within due bounds* (εἰς τὸ μέτριον μᾶλλον συνέστειλε) its power by splitting your single royal line into two."

Dionysius Halicarnassensis, *Ant. Rom.* 2.75 (i BCE): "By such laws Numa *limited the city to thrift and moderation* (εἰς μὲν εὐτέλειαν καὶ σωφροσύνην … συνέστειλε … τὴν πόλιν)."

Philo, *All.* 2.60: "But thanks be to God that the change, and the stripping naked of the mind because of the deprivation of virtue, *did not spread to people outside* (οὐκ ἄχρι τῶν ἐκτὸς ἐχύθη), *but remained in the house* (ἀλλ᾽ ἔμεινεν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ). For it says, "He was stripped naked in his house" (Gen. 9.21). For even if the wise man does sin, he still does not go to ruin like the bad man. For the evil of the latter *is spread abroad* (κέχυται), but that of the former *is confined* (συνέσταλται)."

Philo, *All*. 3.154: "Therefore at the passage through them, called the Passover, he commands us "to have our loins girded" (Exod. 12.11) that is, *to have our appetites under restraint* (συνεστάλθαι τὰς ἐπιθυμίας). Let the trowel, therefore, that is to say reason, follow closely upon passion, *preventing it from running riot* (κωλύων αὐτὸ χεῖσθαι)."

Plutarch, *Non Posse Suav.* 31 (*Mor.* 1107C) (i-ii CE): "Epicurus… *confines our natures and throws them down into very straitened places* (εἰς στενόν τι κομιδῇ …

[34] For other examples see Bauer ad συστέλλω (3).

συνέστειλε καὶ κατέβαλε τὴν φύσιν) which are not clean either but only bring bodily delight for the soul, as if our natures could achieve nothing better than escaping from harm."

Plutarch, *Cat. Min.* 4.1 (i-ii CE): "When Cato received the priesthood of Apollo, he moved house, accepted his share of the patrimony, which was 120 talents, *and reduced his standard of living even more* (τὴν μὲν δίαιταν ἔτι μᾶλλον συνέστειλεν). "

Hence Cato 'tightened his belt', as we might say in English.[35]

2.6. The Semantics of Συστέλλω: Conclusion

As we have seen, συστέλλω is perfectly capable of referring to quantitative reduction, even if using this verb would not be the most natural way for Paul to express the shortening of time. There is a variety of uses where the sense is not of diminution of amount but of spatial contraction or restriction along a particular dimension, or on a two-dimensional plane or in three-dimensional space, with some metaphorical uses such as 'defeat' and 'restrain' (i.e. *inhibit* or *repress*) also becoming semanticised or conventionalised.

The most productive opposition[36] of συστέλλω is probably ἐκτείνω (*to extend, stretch out*), and also common is the cognate διαστέλλω (*to expand*). In other passages noted above, συστέλλω is contrasted with διασπάω (*to spread out*), χάσκω (*to open wide*), αἴρω (*to elevate*), ἐξαίρω (*to swell*), and χύνω/ χέω (*to disperse*, *to flow*).[37] This set of rough antonyms suggests that the contours of its semantic field include restriction, contraction, containment and compression.

This can be corroborated by observing some of the near-synonyms with which συστέλλω is juxtaposed more positively, as we have seen above: καθαιρέω (*to reduce*), συνάγω (*to draw together*), κωλύω χεῖσθαι (*to prevent from spreading*), ἐπέχω χωρεῖν (*to keep from advancing*) and πυκνόω (*to thicken*). Again, this set of analogous terms suggests the same results as the oppositions.

Similarly, the adverbial phrases which accompany συστέλλω reinforce the point. There are phrases which emphasise contraction in size, as when a snake reduces itself to a small size (συστέλλει εἰς μικρόν), or when the earth, as seen from the sky, appears diminished (ἐς βραχὺ συνεσταλμένην). There are also phrases which emphasise delimitation within small spaces (εἰς στενόν τι, εἰς ὀλίγον, ἐπ᾽ ὀλίγον τόπον) or within particular bounds (συστέλλω εἴσω…, πρὸς τὸ μέτρον, εἰς τὸ μέτριον, ἐντὸς τῶν ἰδίων ὅρων).

3. "The time is limited." The present καιρός as circumscribed or delimited

In conclusion, the initial task is to select an appropriate sense for συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, then to assess its fit in its immediate context, and finally in the chapter as a whole.

First, then, we have noted that the sense of quantitative shortening (§2.1) is unlikely given that there would be a lot of other, more straightforward ways of expressing such a

[35] Cf. also similarly, Plutarch, *Cleom.* 11.2.

[36] By 'opposition', here, I do not mean an opposite in an absolute sense (black vs white, good vs evil), but with reference to terms where a marked contrast is drawn between συστέλλω and another action or state. Similarly Barr, *Biblical Words for Time* (see n. 1), 43 and n. 1.

[37] Cf. also εὐρύνω (*to widen*), as when e.g. Philo speaks of how the Therapeutae *fold* (συστέλλοντες) some parts of their garments and *spread out* (εὐρύνοντες) others (*Cont*. 51).

point. The idea of a 'lowering' (§2.2) is also implausible because time is not imagined as having height. If time is pictured as a line, then horizontal contraction or confinement (§2.3-4) is also a possibility. Perhaps most appropriate, since time is abstract, are the references to restraining or confining more abstract objects: Plato's reference to the limitation of power, Philo's references to the confinement of evil and to the restraint of appetites, and Plutarch's reference to enclosing our nature within a space. Seeing these as analogies would suggest that a limit has been set on time, which is an idea that makes sense in Paul's thought. This would mean that the present καιρός is circumscribed or delimited or bounded (without there being necessarily a reference to its brevity).

Secondly, the immediate context shows that such an emphasis on the delimiting of the time fits well. (1) Juxtaposed to Paul's statement is another which begins τὸ λοιπόν, i.e. "for the time that remains" (v. 29b). Such a reference only makes sense on the understanding of a defined or delimited boundary of time in the future. (2) The statement shortly after, that "the form of this world is passing away" (v. 31) is, like ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, a statement about the present time, but is also, similarly, a statement about its impermanence. (3) The paradoxical ὡς μή instructions in verses 29b-31a rest on the impermanence of the cosmos as currently ordered:

- those who are married should not live as those who possess wives in perpetuity (and, presumably, should not hope for children who will preserve their name);
- those who mourn should not do so as if the deaths of Christian loved ones are permanent (cf. 1 Thess 4,13-18);
- those who are happy – presumably about features of this present order – should not treat that happiness as something lasting;
- those who buy things should not regard those possessions as property which is abiding (and which can therefore be passed on down the generations);
- those who engage with the world should not be engrossed in it, that is, over-invested in it.[38]

The fact that a time-limit has been placed on τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου means that plans and actions based on its permanence are wrong-headed.[39] Indeed, the present order is *already* disintegrating, and so even now the devotion to the Lord that accords with divine calling is compromised by over-entanglement in the world.

Thirdly, to my mind the most compelling reason to adopt this reading is the context of the chapter as a whole. Much of 1 Corinthians 7 might very roughly be summed up as an argument that, while marriage is a qualified καλόν, singleness is a greater καλόν. The surprise of the chapter lies in the fact that ever since the beginning of creation, the opposite had been the case.

In Genesis 2,18, God observes that it is *not* good for Adam to be alone (*οὐ καλὸν* εἶναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον μόνον), and therefore creates Eve. Not only that, but God gave Adam and Eve the injunction to fill the world with descendants. The impression is that the world is to continue in this way: their descendants were similarly to have descendants, and so on *ad infinitum.* Similarly, the covenants with Noah (Gen 9,9), Abraham (17,17), Moses (e.g. Exod 12,24), and David (2 Sam 22,51) apply to their descendants, apparently in perpetuity. The same is the case for Aaron and his children, whose priesthood belongs to them εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα

[38] As Barclay, in "Apocalyptic Allegiance" (see n. 11), 267, is probably right to observe, this final statement "summarizes and generalizes the others"

[39] Having said this, there is a risk in systematising 7,29b-31a too neatly, given its paradoxical quality: so, rightly, Starling, *1 Corinthians* (see n. 18), 182-183.

(Exod 29,9). Even for individuals who were not patriarchs or priests, descendants were a way of making one's name a permanent fixture (*Sir*. 40,19).[40] Conversely, says Pseudo-Phocylides, to remain unmarried is to die nameless – a widespread thought in antiquity.[41] Indeed, the desire of parents is for "the children they have begotten to succeed to their name, race and property" (Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2.129).[42] These are central ingredients of τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.

However, the seemingly everlasting future of marriage and children was not, in the reality of God's will, something destined to carry on indefinitely. Marriage, and attendant procreation, are lesser goods than singleness. What might have looked like an everlasting continuum of time starting from the beginning in fact now has an identifiable end. History does not simply stretch forward in an everlasting future of repeated procreation. The time between the first coming of Christ and his return cannot therefore be regarded as continuing in the same manner as time "BC", in which it was a fundamental duty to "be fruitful and increase in number and multiply" (Gen 9,7). Rather, the present time is *restricted* or *limited*, and will come to an end at the parousia.

This interval is also undoubtedly conditioned by the prior Christ event, and so this time is qualitatively different. How much this difference can be inferred from the statement ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, however, is more difficult to determine.[43] It may be, as in the case of Athenaeus's curious claim about the increased density of certain waters in winter, that 1 Cor. 7,29a also refers to some kind of compression or compaction of time. At the very least, the fact that the time is delimited itself entails a qualitative difference from time considered as unbounded – especially when the end could come at any time. Paul's language is very brief here, however, and one should be wary of overloading the phrase.[44] More light on the quality of the present καιρός in the immediate context can be derived from the points that the current era is one of "present constraint" and is even now "passing away" (1 Cor. 7,26.31). Certainly one should also be wary of treating Paul's reference to time in 1 Cor. 7,25-31 as running too much along a straight Cullmannian line.[45]

To return to ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος ἐστίν, and tie this in with the linguistic observations above, it had appeared that time, like an ever-rolling stream, would continue to flow (χύνω/ χέω) unendingly. God has, however, restricted (συστέλλω) the flow, such that it will now come to an end. It will no longer "stretch out" (ἐκτείνω, διαστέλλω) indefinitely.

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[40] "Children and the building of a city firmly fix a name." (τέκνα καὶ οἰκοδομὴ πόλεως στηρίζουσιν ὄνομα.) Cf. Deut 25,5-10. Gundry, *Women, Gender, and Sex* (see n. 6), 194, notes that the point about marrying in 1 Cor 7,29 amounts to a criticism of marriage in order to produce heirs.

[41] *Ps.-Phoc.* 175: "Do not remain unmarried, lest you die nameless (μὴ μείνῃς ἄγαμος, μή πως νώνυμνος ὄληαι)." I owe this reference to Gundry, *Women, Gender, and Sex* (see n. 6), 145. For parallels, see Walter T. Wilson, *The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides.* CEJL (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 187.

[42] "Parents pray that they may leave behind them alive the children they have begotten to succeed to their name, race and property." (γονέων μὲν γὰρ εὐχαί, ζῶντας ἀπολιπεῖν οὓς ἐγέννησαν, διαδεξομένους ὄνομά τε αὐτῶν καὶ γένος καὶ οὐσίαν.) Collins writes in a matter-of-fact manner: "Marriage is a pragmatic instrument for securing rights to property and inheritance." John J. Collins, "Marriage, Divorce, and Family in Second Temple Judaism", in *Families in Ancient Israel,* ed. Leo G. Perdue (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 104-162 (109).

[43] For a theological interpretation of 1 Cor 7,29 in terms of "systolic time", see Paul Griffiths, *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 95-96.

[44] For Hierzenberger, *Weltbewertung bei Paulus*, for example, 1 Cor 7,29a refers "zur alles entscheidenden Zeit, zur konzentrierten, erfüllten, damit freilich auch eingegrenzten und kurzen Zeit." (33). More modestly, Whittle comments that "this special time is characterised by both quantity and quality": Sarah Whittle, "'Let even those who have wives be as those who had none' (1 Cor. 7:29)", in *Marriage, Family and Relationships: Biblical, Doctrinal and Contemporary Perspectives,* ed. Sarah Whittle, Thomas Noble & Philip Johnston, eds. (Leicester: Apollos, 2017), 86-100 (93).

[45] See further, Jervis, *Paul on Time* (see n. 6).

God has set a limit to its advance (ἐπέχω χωρεῖν), and so it is confined to a particular measurement (πρὸς τὸ μέτρον συνεσταλμένον).[46]

[46] I am very grateful to Profs. John Barclay and Jonathan Linebaugh for reading and providing feedback on an earlier draft of this article.