Submission in Context: Christ and the Greco-Roman Household Codes

Afternoon posts will generally focus on practical application. We promptly changed the title to something a little less polarizing I used to hate talking about submission too. Growing up evangelical, I learned to do inductive Bible study before I learned to balance an equation. To my surprise, the preceding paragraph had nothing to do with the relationship between men and women, but was instead about the relationship between masters and slaves!
A little more research revealed that all three of the passages that instruct wives to submit to their husbands are either preceded or followed by instructions for slaves to submit to their masters. The pattern repeats itself again in his letter to the Colossians, where Paul wrote: Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged. Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. The implications of this pattern are astounding.

As far back as the fourth century BC, philosophers considered the household to be a microcosm, designed to reflect the hierarchical structure of the society, the gods, and ultimately the universe. Many Roman officials believed the household codes to be such an important part of Pax Romana that they passed laws ensuring its protection. It was the best the culture had to offer. Newsom and Sharon H. And with Roman officials looking for every excuse to imprison Christians, to challenge the codes would bring even more unwanted scrutiny to the early Church. The Christian versions of the household codes were clearly progressive for their time more on that in a minute, but does that mean they have the last word, that Christians in changing places and times cannot progress further? Complementarians often accuse egalitarians of allowing cultural norms to shape their views of gender roles.

But in this case, it is the complementarians who have given culture—that of the Greco-Roman familial structure—the final word. But what about the fact that Paul compares the submission of the wife to her husband to the relationship between Christ and the Church? Where typical Greco-Roman household codes required nothing of the head of household regarding fair treatment of subordinates, Peter and Paul encouraged men to be kind to their slaves, to be gentle with their children, and, shockingly, to love their wives as they love themselves. Furthermore, the Christian versions of the household codes are the only ones that speak directly to the less powerful members of the household—the slaves, wives, and children—probably because the church at the time consisted of just such powerless people.


Description: Ephesian women in Greco-Roman and early Christian perspective

Texts from philosophers of various traditions reveal Platonic-Aristotelian influence. The submissiveness of the inferior parties of the dyads was assumed. As the early Christian church emerged, they must have been familiar with written and unwritten laws regarding household management. Examining the apologetic function of the household code through the lens of social context, Balch asserts that the author of 1 Peter exhorts the churches in Asia Minor to live up to the expectation of the larger society. She also notes the subtle protest in these epistles against the prevalent ethics of their contemporaneous culture.

Altogether, these scholarly works provide a dynamic picture of the early church that facilitates understanding of how the household code functioned in the Christian communities, and how the early church lived out the gospel message. These scholars rightly point out that NT household codes are an adaptation of the widespread contemporary household management schema. Since the church members came from some kind of household, they would have known the written and unwritten laws pertaining to their roles in their households. While some scholars consider Christianity a movement mimicking the trend of greater social freedom for women in the Greco-Roman world, 19 the following analyses of NT household codes reveal a more encompassing purpose: expressing the gospel message of love and mercy through household relationships.

In light of the good news, the codes set free not only women but also slaves and other household members from oppressive cultural elements. NT household codes bear the power of the gospel in cultural forms. Balch is right that Christian communities in Asia Minor were among the minority religious groups who needed to defend their legitimacy and come to terms with Roman household ethics. Peter 23 did not ask the church members to withdraw at the threat of social scrutiny, but to engage the society with a new identity, a new perspective of honor, and a new attitude toward subordination. In 1 Peter, the first redemption of the Roman patriarchal culture is the renewal of identity in Christ. The beginning two verses of 1 Peter can be easily skipped over as merely salutation, but they actually set the tone for the rest of the letter.

This resonates with Roman honor. This new identity of choseness, with its eschatological hope of honor in Christ, provided a solid foundation for Christians to endure societal scrutiny and to bear witness to their faith as they lived as aliens in this world. They had been in virtual exile for a few centuries. How could Gentile converts who grew up in their homeland understand the alienation resulting from exile? In —17 Peter explains that such alien status occurred not because of their physical location but because of their different lifestyle. This new identity in Christ subtly challenges the hierarchical belief of Greco-Roman household management based on the portion of rationality a person possesses. The purpose of life is not the pursuit of personal happiness or state happiness, but to glorify God, with joy as a side effect. The new identity in Christ leads to new perspectives on relationships between husband and wife.

As mentioned above, the fatherfamilias acted as the priest of the household gods. One of the signs of household harmony or peace is the religious uniformity of wife and slaves. This must have caused negative reactions from society. First Peter tackles the issue after addressing slaves. Thus, there would be no compromise in her allegiance to God. Thus the instruction should not be taken as a theological principle but as an exhortation for a Christian wife in a non-Christian family to minimize conflict due to religious practices. How did husbands honor their wives in Roman society?
They did not! Harmony would no longer be displayed by the proper ruling order in the household; rather it is lived out in mutual honor between household members.

Thus, household relations still model relations for the larger society. Green observes the chiasitic structure of —, which wraps the household codes around the example of Christ. As such, slaves and wives were encouraged to model after Christ, and they exemplified a lifestyle for all Christians. The status of slaves and wives reflected the status of Christians in Roman society who were without power and privilege and were under social scrutiny. The Christian communities in Ephesus, located in Asia Minor, would face a similar social scrutiny as those addressed by 1 Peter. The issue of leadership succession may have loomed large in this context, for these Christian communities may not have had direct interaction with Paul. As the growing number of Christians would require better structure for sustainability, hierarchy and order might be reinforced in the process.

Indeed, the teaching did not seek to overturn the existing patriarchal structure. These practices undermined the popular mentality of the inferiority of women of the time. Through household relationships, the transformation of the cultural values began with the smallest step in the daily interaction within the household and rippled through society. This new identity in Christ entitled Christians to their inheritance in heaven Eph and ensured their eschatological hope of glory and honor. By claiming that Christians have honor and inheritance in Christ, Paul indeed subtly altered the social code of honor and shame, and the treatment of the marginalized. How does one obtain this new identity in Christ?

Being reconciled into one body, they stopped being foreigners and aliens and moved into the household of God. The concept of household is essential here. More important is that their new identity in Christ liberates them from the old hierarchy based on their presumed portion of rationality. Unity occurs when they align themselves with the head, Christ, in the Spirit. All enter into the household of God, the kingdom of God, and thus are all under the rule of the only paterfamilias , God. What would be the purpose of the Ephesian household code in light of this theme? His choice may be partly due to his understanding of unity as solely dependent on the Spirit.

However, Eph —16 describes a visible and growing unity when all the members of the body align properly to the head, Christ. The result is their growing into the likeness of Christ. This surely is a more cohesive picture of unity. The juxtaposition of husband-wife and Christ-church not only elevates women to a glorious position in the context of the church, it also reminds all church members of their marginalized position in society.

However, retaining the social strata does not mean Paul intended to keep the structure. As with 1 Peter, authors of NT household codes did not aim to demolish the social structure but to define for the first Christian communities the proper relationships among the members of the communities. The first purpose was to live out the gospel message and convey the message to the larger society. On the surface the Christians seemed to adapt to the existing patriarchal hierarchy, but as indicated above, the subtle alteration of the codes in light of the new identity in Christ asserted the transformational power of the gospel in daily life. Following the Roman emphasis on family order as the foundation of social and state harmony, the transformation in family life certainly would ripple across the whole social structure. Fear of unbridled desires, especially sexual desires, seems to be the basis for Plato and Aristotle appealing to reason as a safeguard against irrational desires.

On the other hand, both philosophers recognized the desire for immortality through procreation, which necessitated the union of male and female and regulations related to this union. Neither Plato nor Aristotle denied the natural tendencies of desire, but the motivation of regulation was to rule over these desires. They tried to win the battle by reason. Through subjugating women externally, they thought they could contain such desires internally. This desire to rule invites power and, possibly, abuse of power.

Justice quickly turns into legalism that demands each person accept the status quo. The new perspective will bring out the gifts God has given each person, male and female, young and old, slave and free. Reason and relationship are only two dimensions of who a person is. Abuse of power can be reduced because right authority and hierarchy are built upon the foundation of love. However, the process of institutionalization must have put more weight on male leadership as shown in the Pastoralis. Historically, the church exhibited gradual conformation to patriarchal hierarchy. MacDonald is correct that, in institutionalization, leadership authority—male leadership authority—overshadowed the ideals in the epistles.

Roman law became the basis of canon law, and the patriarchal mentality was absorbed into the veins of the church. The study of NT household codes illuminates the grace and mercy of the gospel and demonstrates hope for the oppressed and marginalized. Anachronistic application of the codes would only eclipse that power. Advanced Search.

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Martin notices that Jesus treats women as equals. However, Christian fathers such as Tertullian blamed Eve for opening the door to the Devil and destroying the image of God. My scholarship presents a new approach to the study of early Christian texts through employing literary and archaeological Greco-Roman sources, including previously unstudied sources, in order to offer a fresh perspective on the way in which these works present early Christian women.

My study reveals that early Christian authors Christianised Greco-Roman customs to establish exemplary social roles for women as wives, mothers and members of the public among others in the early Christian community. In essence, my research demonstrates that early Christian authors worked to maintain what was deemed right and moral by society at large, but through their message is to be a good Christian over being a good member of society. Who do you hope will read this book and why? I hope that academics who study or have an interest in the early Christianity, the New Testament, gender studies, socio-historical approach, biblical archaeology, the ancient world and the eastern provinces of the Roman
Empire will benefit from my work. Although the book offers mostly specialized research, every chapter contains introductory sections which cover topics such as the history of Ephesus, issues of authorship of early Christian texts, and the contents of the works of ancient authors.

Therefore, academics or students who do not have detailed knowledge of the field will also find it useful. What practical suggestions do you have for teachers or others who might want to use this for the classroom or discussions? It is very easy to find your way around the book because, after the introductory chapters on method ch 1, scholarship ch 2, history of Ephesus ch 3, all the chapters follow the same template.

**Ephesus - HISTORY**

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Chapter 1 may be useful for teachers to instruct students on how to construct their own methodology, as I developed a systematic approach to classifying my keywords and setting up time and place parameters. Chapter 3 is particularly useful for history students as it presents a very comprehensive social history of Ephesus prepared from many different primary and secondary sources. The first sections of each chapter present a background for the texts on the above-mentioned issues on women and the second sections of each chapter develop analyses of the texts in a new light, as opposed to traditional approaches- that is, to interpret the motives of the writings by looking at the texts themselves apart from their socio-historical context.

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The trend continued into the twentieth century. Hippolytus decreed ordination for clergy and not for widows, whose lot was prayer. Such evidence indicates the shrinking roles in church ministry for women in the third century. Ruth Tucker and Walter L. David L. Joel B. Green, 1 Peter Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Cambridge: W. Heinemann, , xii. Oxford: Clarendon, , Lynn H. Bauman, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome , 12, reveals another aspect of the accusation of adultery for elite women attempting politics. When Panaetius set free Stoicism from pure philosophical debates of the nature of the universe to embrace moral duties especially in terms of serving the state, he enabled Middle Stoicism to engage the practical Roman mind.

See James E. Balch, Let Wives Be Submissive, Margaret Y. Carolyn Osiek et al. The Isis cult brought much suspicion from Roman society. A frieze recovered from ancient Rome depicts veiled men not women in procession honoring Isis. See Tucker and Liefeld, Daughters of the Church, Its feminist tone sharply contrasts with the androcentric Roman tradition. Despite the official effort to eliminate the Isis cult, the cult persisted and finally was tolerated. Green, 1 Peter, Scholarly consensus regarding authorship of 1 Peter is elusive. Achtemeier and Epp, 1 Peter, Kreider, Worship and Evangelism, MacDonald, Pauline Churches, New York: MacMillan, 1984, 69—From the weaker are required subordination, fidelity, and esteem.

Whatever the intellectual sources feeding into this ethos, with it the great part of Hellenistic primitive Christianity mastered the task of shaping social relations within a community which, on the one hand, demanded of its members a high degree of solidarity and brotherliness and, on the other, encompassed various social strata. John H.

**Woman's Role in New Testament Household Codes: Transforming First-Century Roman Culture | CBE**

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. The implications of this pattern are astounding. As far back as the fourth century BC, philosophers considered the household to be a microcosm, designed to reflect the hierarchical structure of the society, the gods, and ultimately the universe. Many Roman officials believed the household codes to be such an important part of Pax Romana that they passed laws ensuring its protection.

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But in this case, it is the complementarians who have given culture—that of the Greco-Roman familial structure—the final word. But what about the fact that Paul compares the submission of the wife to her husband to the relationship between Christ and the Church? Where typical Greco-Roman household codes required nothing of the head of household regarding fair treatment of subordinates, Peter and Paul encouraged men to be kind to their slaves, to be gentle with their children, and, shockingly, to love their wives as they love themselves. Furthermore, the Christian versions of the household codes are the only ones that speak directly to the less powerful members of the household—the slaves, wives, and children—probably because the church at the time consisted of just such powerless people. To dignify their positions, Peter linked the sufferings of slaves to the suffering of Christ and likened the obedience of women to the obedience of Sarah 1 Peter — 25; — 6. Ronald W. I cannot overstate the degree to which this remix—in which ministers are reminded that they too have a heavenly master—would have been radical in the ancient world.

Again, we cannot argue that the Greco-Roman hierarchal relationship between husbands and wives is divinely instituted without arguing the same about the Greco-Roman hierarchal relationship between slaves and masters. See especially 1 Peter, where Peter provides an extended metaphor comparing slaves to Christ. Furthermore, if you look close enough, you can detect the rumblings of subversion beneath the seemingly acquiescent text. It is hard for us to recognize it now, but Peter and Paul were introducing the first Christian family to an entirely new community, a community that transcends the rigid hierarchy of human institutions, a community in which submission is mutual and all are free. For Christians, the presence of the Household Codes in Scripture must be considered in light of Jesus, who made a habit of turning hierarchy on its head. Not so with you. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

But with Christ, hierarchal relationships are exposed for the sham that they are, as the last are made first, the first are made last, the poor are blessed, the meek inherit the earth, and the God of the universe takes the form of a slave. The patriarchal hierarchical nature of Roman society is evidenced in its familial structure. Since the archaic period, the paterfamilias enjoyed unlimited power in his household, not only over family
possessions but also over all household members. He represented the family to the larger society. He acted as a priest over the cult of the ancestors. When Augustus brought an end to the civil war between the camps of Caesar and Pompey, he left the economic policy largely untouched. Social stratification continued to be a prominent feature of Roman society. Within two years, Augustus issued two laws known as the lex Julia : lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinis c.

The former intended to restrain marriage within social class boundaries and to encourage procreation. It penalized the unmarried and childless particularly through restricting their inheritance rights. The latter aimed to boost morality by exposing adultery to the public sphere through a trial with judge and jury. In addition, the dress codes for women were specified to distinguish the modest wife from the adulteress and the prostitute. Bruce W. First, women continued to be ruled by men. Second, within the patriarchal hierarchy, wealth facilitated upward mobility for women. Indeed, domestic life could no longer be totally private, for the law set women free from the absolute power of paterfamilias.

If the written laws for regulating household management of the upper strata bore little success, most likely there existed unwritten agreements regarding domestic matters. Texts from philosophers of various traditions reveal Platonic-Aristotelian influence. The submissiveness of the inferior parties of the dyads was assumed. As the early Christian church emerged, they must have been familiar with written and unwritten laws regarding household management.

Examining the apologetic function of the household code through the lens of social context, Balch asserts that the author of 1 Peter exhorts the churches in Asia Minor to live up to the expectation of the larger society. She also notes the subtle protest in these epistles against the prevalent ethics of their contemporary culture. Altogether, these scholarly works provide a dynamic picture of the early church that facilitates understanding of how the household code functioned in the Christian communities, and how the early church lived out the gospel message. These scholars rightly point out that NT household codes are an adaptation of the widespread contemporary household management schema. Since the church members came from some kind of household, they would have known the written and unwritten laws pertaining to their roles in their households.

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