

“SUBMIT YOURSELVES TO ONE ANOTHER”: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE HOUSEHOLD CODE OF EPHESIANS 5:15–6:9

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I. Source-Materials for New Testament Social History

In order to answer contemporary questions about the place of women in the church, a necessary task is to ask what social policy toward women was in the early church. Unless we understand NT social history sympathetically within its cultural settings—which are ancient and alien to ours—we are predisposed to misinterpret the social realities reflected there. The result is that we will superimpose our modern questions and social agendas onto the ancient texts in order to receive the answers we expect back again clothed in biblical authority.¹

One finds significant socio-historical evidence in the household codes (*Haustafeln*) both in the NT and in the literature of its host cultures. Paul's reference to God in Eph 3:14 as the *great paterfamilias*, the patriarch over every family of humanity, presumes a Roman cultural matrix,² but household codes occurred throughout the biblical world. No less in Jewish, Greek, Hellenistic Egyptian, and Roman society than in Christian society, wives were taught everywhere to submit to their husbands, children to their parents, slaves to their masters.

A foundational text is in Aristotle's *Politics*:³

[T]he male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind . . .

¹ Phraseology from Albert Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters* (London: A. & C. Black, 1912) 2.

² See Richard Oster, “When Men Wore Veils to Worship,” *NTS* 34 (1988) 493–97, who shows that the “cultural matrix” of the ritual veiling of *men* in sacral settings in the church at Corinth is Roman.

³ Aristotle *Politics* 1254b3–1277b25, excerpted in Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982) 63f. [hereafter cited simply as Lefkowitz-Fant].

Of household management we have seen that there are three parts—one is the rule of a master over slaves, . . . another of a father, and the third of a husband. A husband and father rules over wife and children, both free, but the rule differs, the rule over his children being a royal, over his wife a constitutional rule. For although there may be exceptions to the order of nature, the male is by nature fitter for command than the female, just as the older and full-grown is superior to the younger and more immature. . . . [W]hen one rules and the other is ruled we endeavour to create a difference of outward forms and names and titles of respect. . . . The relation of the male to the female is of this kind, but there the inequality is permanent. The rule of a father over his children is royal, for he receives both love and the respect due to age, exercising a kind of royal power. . . .

The freeman rules over the slave after another manner from that in which the male rules over the female, or the man over the child; although the parts of the soul are present in all of them, they are present in different degrees. For the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, but it is without authority, and the child has, but it is immature. So it must necessarily be with the moral virtues also; all may be supposed to partake of them, but only in such manner and degree as is required by each for the fulfillment of his duty. . . . Clearly, then, moral virtue belongs to all of them; but the temperance of a man and of a woman, are not, as Socrates maintained, the same; the courage of a man is shown in commanding, of a woman in obeying. . . . All classes must be deemed to have their special attributes; as the poet says of women, 'Silence is a woman's glory', but this is not equally the glory of a man. The child is imperfect, and therefore obviously his virtue is not relative to himself alone, but to the perfect man and to his teacher, and in like manner the virtue of the slave is relative to his master.

Studies of the household codes commonly observe that Aristotle's threefold division—husbands and wives, fathers and children, masters and slaves—formed the pattern for the *genre* of the *Haustafeln*.⁴ The instructions are stereotypical; the underlying theme everywhere is that the health of the family and the stability of society depend upon the submission of those who are under the authority of husbands, fathers, and masters. Wives, children, slaves: in every host-culture of the NT world, their primary virtue was obedience.

On wives, a famous quotation from Demosthenes observes that Athenian men want other kinds of women to be available too, but they must have a good wife for the purpose of raising up legitimate heirs and successors. "We have courtesans for pleasure, concubines to look after the day-to-day needs of the body, wives that we may breed legitimate children and have a trusty warden

⁴ On the pattern of the *Haustafeln* see David Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive* (SBLMS 29; Atlanta: Scholars, 1981); John Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990) 165–266.

of what we have in the house."⁵ So says a Neo-Pythagorean text of the third–second century BC:

A woman's greatest virtue is chastity. Because of this quality she is able to honor and to cherish her own particular husband. . . . Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities. . . . Chastity is more appropriately female.

[T]he most important quality for chastity is to be pure in respect to her marriage bed, and for her not to have affairs with men from other households. If she breaks the law in this way she wrongs the gods of her family and provides her family and home not with its own offspring but with bastards. She wrongs the true gods, the gods to whom she swore to join with her own ancestors and her relatives in the sharing of life and the begetting of children according to law. She wrongs her own fatherland, because she does not abide by its established rules. . . . She should also consider . . . that there is no means of atoning for this sin; no way she can approach the shrines or the altars of the gods as a pure woman, beloved of god. . . . The greatest glory a freeborn woman can have—her foremost honor—is the witness her own children will give to her chastity towards her husband, the stamp and likeness they bear to the father whose seed produced them . . .⁶

By her chastity the good wife honors her husband and provides him with offspring of unquestionable legitimacy. A sexually loose wife confuses the question of inheritance and succession, casting doubt on the legitimacy of all her children, and bringing shame and confusion on the entire kinship group.⁷ This value holds everywhere in the cultural world of the NT: for the mother of his children a man must have a wife like Odysseus's Penelope, Tiberius Gracchus's Cornelia, or the anonymous Roman eulogist's Turia.⁸ She must be devoted to the family gods; she must be chaste; she must be domestic; she must honor her husband and submit to his authority. These rock-bottom virtues preserve hearth and home and family lineage. Good Roman wives demonstrate their character by *pudicitia* (which is often translated "chastity" but includes modesty and domesticity) by respecting and honoring their husbands, by working faithfully to manage the domestic affairs of the household—for

⁵ Demosthenes 59.118–22; cf. W. K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) 113.

⁶ Text from a Pythagorean sect in Italy, 3d–2d C BC; cited from Lefkowitz-Fant, 104; similar Neo-Pythagorean texts on wives and children in Abraham Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989) 82–85.

⁷ Athenian wives were expected to hold together not only their own homes, but the entire city-state by their commitment to the integrity of the οἶκος (Lacey, *Family in Classical Greece*, 100–124).

⁸ Penelope: *Odyssey* 1–4; Cornelia: Plutarch's *Lives of the Gracchi*, Tacitus's *Dialogue* 28; Turia: the *Laudatio Turiae* [texts gathered in Lefkowitz-Fant, 138ff., 141f., 208–11].

example, in weaving cloth, overseeing the care of the children, and managing the servants.

As with wives, so with children: they demonstrate their character primarily by obedience. This ancient value hardly needs illustration. It was self-evident: one example is the Deuteronomic Code's injunction to stone the incorrigible son.⁹ Similar laws existed in the other host cultures of Christianity. Stories may be invoked from Roman literature where the *paterfamilias* found it necessary to execute their own sons or daughters, though their power to do so was curtailed by legislation in the imperial period.¹⁰

That slaves must obey their masters was more than self-evident: in a society whose urban populations contained as much as 30 to 50 percent slaves,¹¹ slave rebellions were nightmarish threats. "Every slave we own is an enemy we harbor" ran the proverb.¹² Numerous rebellions occurred. The revolt of Spartacus was one of three major Roman slave wars; in the Hellenistic world the most memorable was the revolt of Andronicus in Pergamum. Hence slaves were ruthlessly suppressed.¹³ The great horror story of the repression of Roman slaves is told by Tacitus.¹⁴ During Nero's reign a slave in the household of Pedanius Secundus, the urban prefect, murdered his master, apparently out of homosexual rivalry. The killer was readily identified, but

⁹ Deut 21:18–21; cf. Exod 21:7, Lev 20:9. In classical Athens children were expected to display respect, loyalty, and obedience toward their fathers in particular: Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) 101–5.

¹⁰ E.g., Valerius Maximus 6.1.3, 6; for the law giving the *paterfamilias* the power of life and death over his family, *XII Tables* 4.2, Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* 5.19.9; cf. Jane Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986) 6f.

¹¹ Statistics on slave populations: P. A. Brunt, *Italian Manpower* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 121–30; but his quantifications are more detailed than the evidence allows. M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957²) 1:17ff., 46 speaks simply of "enormous masses" of slaves in the urban centers of the Empire.

¹² Diodorus Siculus 34; cf. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, *Roman Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966) 1:230–34, 319f.; on the slave revolt of Aristonicus (2d century BC) see M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941²) 2:806f.

¹³ Keith Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford, 1987). His picture of Roman inhumanity toward slaves should be balanced by the humanity visible in such slave owners as Columella or Pliny, and in the advice of such moralists as Musonius Rufus and Epictetus—the latter himself an ex-slave.

¹⁴ Tacitus *Annals* 14.42–45 (Penguin translation); cf. John A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967) 57.

Roman law mandated that *all* slaves in a household where a slave murdered the master must be put to death on the presumption that all were implicated in the murder. The debate went to the Senate itself: must we slaughter over four hundred innocent slaves, including many women and children, in such a case as this? The patrician senator Cassius Longinus made a powerful speech urging that any deviation from the letter of the law might encourage slave rebellion, and too much was at stake: "The only way we can keep this down is by intimidation." The whole slave household was therefore executed.

For those who will want to dispute my socio-historical picture, let me anticipate three methodological objections: the problem of literary anecdotalism, the problem of diachronic generalization, and the question of "chattel or person?" in the status of ancient women.

1) We must observe the methodological *caveat* that quotations and anecdotes selected from the literature may distort the picture we paint of ancient social history.¹⁵ Clearly scholars can *use* the literature to color their picture in whatever tones they desire; more subtly, by the simple fact that often the literature is their only kind of evidence, the picture they see is discolored from the start.¹⁶ What kind of social history of America would a researcher 1900 years from now write if the evidence came solely from the *National Enquirer* or *People* magazine or the daytime soaps?—to which the evidential value of a Suetonius, a Catullus, or a Martial is comparable.¹⁷ Or what if the evidence came only from *Ozzie and Harriet*?—to which the evidential value of a Livy, a Plutarch, or a Vergil is comparable. We need to broaden our evidential base to include nonliterary evidence, which can help clear away the distortions creeping in from literary anecdotalism.¹⁸

¹⁵ On the problems of literary sources, Iuro Kajanto, "On Divorce among the Common People of Rome," *Revue des Études Latines* 47 (1970) 99–113; cf. the methodological observations of John K. Evans, "Plebs Rustica. The Peasantry of Classical Italy," *American Journal of Ancient History* 5 (1980) 19–47, 134–73. My debt to Dr. Evans, under whom I studied Roman social history, is evident everywhere in this study.

¹⁶ E.g., J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Roman Women* (New York: John Day, 1963) is little more than a collection of anecdotes from the literature of the Roman jet-set; one imagines the author sitting at his desk transferring racy stories straight from notecards into his ms. The same is true of many works claiming to be social history.

¹⁷ John Evans sometimes says (in exaggerated tones) that we would know more Roman history if the works of Suetonius had perished; Suetonius is not a serious reporter. His real value is as the ancient equivalent of the *National Enquirer*; he gives us an insight into Roman history from the street level.

¹⁸ Anecdotalism is "the ingrained habit of 'founding an analysis on individual passages or occurrences, as if every statement in one of the "better" ancient authors is both factually accurate and universally valid unless the contrary can be proved, which is rarely the case'" (Evans, "Plebs Rustica," 30, citing Moses Finley). This results in

2) We must beware of drawing our picture of historical backgrounds diachronically rather than synchronically; that is, instead of giving a moving picture of some topic over a sweeping period, we should give a snapshot of it in the exact period and place under discussion. Richard Oster has well illustrated this methodological fallacy in the discussion of the thousand priestesses/prostitutes in the temple of Aphrodite at Corinth as reported by Strabo and others: those reports describe Old Corinth before its destruction by Lucius Mummius in 146 BC, not New Corinth, Roman Corinth of the NT period.¹⁹

Can this diachronic literary picture be taken to represent the social realities for wives in the NT period? I would argue so on two considerations. First, investigating widely in the social milieu of Christianity—not only the literary but also the nonliterary evidence, from the “worthy woman” text of Proverbs to the descriptions of worthy wives in Homer, Xenophon, Plutarch, Hierocles, and Musonius Rufus,²⁰ to the marriage contracts of Hellenistic Egyptian papyri, to Athenian and Roman legal materials, to Roman tomb inscriptions—shows that this picture of women in the social order is everywhere. Exceptions like the Dionysiac women in Euripides’ *Bacchae* prove the rule; at Thebes, Dionysus caused a sort of civic madness ushering in social chaos.²¹ *Bacchae* is a horror story.

The second consideration is the ultimate reason that this picture of the good wife is universal: the biological reality that it is women who bear children. Ancient societies were held together by great households; it was therefore inherently the case that for purposes of inheritance and succession the mother of legitimate children must be a worthy woman. Greek, Roman, and Jewish evidence massively and unanimously testifies that the supreme purpose of marriage was none other than producing legitimate heirs.²² Everywhere in

such mistakes as “The indiscriminate application to the entire class structure of source material which relates to a single stratum only” (*ibid.*, 28).

¹⁹ Oster, “When Men Wore Veils,” 488–93; *idem*, “Use, Misuse, and Neglect of Archaeological Evidence in Some Modern Works on 1 Corinthians,” *ZNW* 83 (1992) 53ff.

²⁰ These sources are conveniently available in Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation*, 82f., 91ff., 100–4, 107ff., 132ff.

²¹ This view of *Bacchae* contrasts to contemporary efforts to see Euripides’ women as ancient archetypes of women’s rising consciousness. For proto-feminism in Euripides, see Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (New York: Schocken, 1975) 103–12; Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986)—to which the Euripides citations in n. 23 may be contrasted.

²² For Athenian materials, Demosthenes 59.118–22; cf. Lacey, *Family in Classical Greece*, 110–13, with numerous further references. For Roman materials note especially the set phrase in Roman marriage contracts, *liberorum quaerendum gratia* or *liberorum pro-creandorum causa* (“for the purpose of producing legitimate heirs”;

ancient society the good wife demonstrated piety toward the family gods, chastity, modesty and submissiveness toward her husband, and domesticity—much as in the pattern Paul enjoins Titus to teach to Christian women in Crete. Older Christian women are to train younger women ἵνα σωφρονίζουσιν . . . φιλάνδρους εἶναι, φιλοτέκνους, σώφρονας, ἀγνάς, οἰκουργοὺς ἀγαθάς, ὑποτασσομένας τοῖς ἰδίοις ἀνδράσιν (NIV, "Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands"). The reason: "so that no one will malign the word of God" (Titus 2:3ff.).

Through the broad sweep of ancient social history, one sees the same constellation of "worthy woman" values because the social realities they reflect were not merely culturally conditioned; they applied everywhere. Thus Paul can say, for example, that the chaos in the assembly at Corinth, partly caused by out-of-control behavior of Christian women, must be controlled by charging them to keep silent in the assemblies and ask their husbands at home about their questions "as in all the congregations of the saints" (1 Cor 14:33). The norm is held, not only in the church, but in its surrounding culture. These texts are much disputed, but the point they make can be massively illustrated from their cultural background: worthy women honor their husbands by modesty, quietness and submission—especially out in public.²³

In nonliterary materials the best portraits of the worthy wife are in Roman tomb inscriptions and in Hellenistic Egyptian marriage contracts from the papyri. Other good evidence shows up in legal texts. Tomb inscriptions establish what the conventional values for wifely virtue were. The most famous example is the *Laudatio Turiae*, dated about 10 BC:

so Augustine *Sermones* 51.22; 278.9; cf. Aulus Gellius *Attic Nights* 4.3.2, 17.21.44; Dionysus of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 2.25.7; Plautus *Captivi* 889; Suetonius *Divus Iulius* 52.3); cf. H. A. Sanders, "A Latin Marriage Contract," *TAPA* 69 (1938): 104–16; Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation*, 78 (Maximus of Tyre), 153 (Musonius Rufus).

²³ Josephus *Against Apion* 2.201: "The woman, says the law, is in all things inferior to the man. Let her accordingly be submissive, not for her humiliation, but that she may be directed; for the authority has been given by God to the man." Plutarch *Conjugal Precepts* 142D: "For a woman ought to talk either through her husband or to her husband." Cf. Livy *History* 34.1–8, and Plutarch *Moralia* 138 (both in Lefkowitz-Fant, 176ff., 240); Sophocles *Ajax* 293; Aristotle *Politics* 1.5.8 (1260a); Euripides *Andromache* 364f., *Hercules* 534f., *Heraclidus* 476f., *Iphigeneia at Aulis* 1830; more examples in Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives*, 237, 274. Ramsey MacMullen, "Woman in Public in the Roman Empire," *Historia* 29 (1980) 208–18, shows that the exceptional cases of Roman women taking prominent public roles should be explained along class lines: these women are from the aristocracy.

In our day, marriages of such long duration, not dissolved by divorce, but terminated by death alone, are indeed rare. For our union was prolonged in unclouded happiness for forty-one years. . . .

Why recall your inestimable qualities, your modesty, deference, affability, your amiable disposition, your faithful attendance to the household duties, your enlightened religion, your unassuming elegance, the modest simplicity and refinement of your manners? Need I speak of your attachment to your kindred, your affection for your family—when you respected my mother as you did your own parents and cared for her tomb as you did for that of your own mother and father—you who share countless other virtues with Roman ladies most jealous of their fair share? These qualities which I claim for you are your own, equalled or excelled by but few; for the experience of men teaches us how rare they are. . . .

We longed for children, which an envious fate denied us. Had Fortune smiled on us in this, what had been lacking to complete our happiness? But an adverse destiny put an end to our hopes . . . Disconsolate to see me without children . . . you wished to put an end to my chagrin by proposing to me a divorce, offering to yield the place to another spouse more fertile, with the only intention of searching for and providing for me a spouse worthy of our mutual affection, whose children you assured me you would have treated as your own. . . . Nothing would have been changed, only you would have rendered to me henceforth the services of a devoted sister or mother-in-law.²⁴

Turia, 1st century BC

Here are more sample epitaphs:

She loved her husband in her heart. She bore two sons. . . . She kept the house and worked in wool.

Claudia, 2d century BC

(Left side of epitaph) My wife, who died before me, chaste in body, my one and only, a loving woman who possessed my heart, she lived as a faithful wife to a faithful husband. . . . (Right side) I was chaste and modest; I did not know the crowd; I was faithful to my husband. . . . He, through my diligent performance of duty, flourished at all times.

Aurelia Philmatio, 1st century BC

None was more precious than she in the world. One so diligent as she has never been seen before. . . . She was courageous, chaste, resolute, honest, a trustworthy guardian. Clean at home, sufficiently clean when she went out, famous among the populace. . . . She would speak briefly and so was never reproached. She was first to rise from her bed and last to return to her bed to rest after she had put each thing in its place. Her yarn never left her hands without good reason.

Allia Potestas, 3rd century AD

²⁴ Cited from Lefkowitz-Fant, 208–11; the next citations are all from the epitaphs collected there, 133–39.

To these one might add the iconography of the bas-reliefs on many Greek and Roman tombs: wives are very often shown with their husbands and children, with their loom or distaff in the background.

In the papyri, typically the marriage contracts bind wives to a standard of sexual faithfulness and domestic industry; husbands, on the other hand, are not always bound to those standards—though the odd contract might require the husband not to take on a concubine or a boy lover or to have children by another woman.

Apollonia shall live with Philiscus, obeying him as a wife should her husband, owning their property in common with him. . . . [I]t shall not be lawful for Apollonia to spend the night or day away from the house of Philiscus without Philiscus's consent or to consort with another man or to dishonor the common home or to cause Philiscus to be shamed by any act that brings shame upon a husband.

. . . Thermion shall fulfil her duties towards her husband and their common life and shall not absent herself from the house for a night or a day without the consent of Apollonius son of Ptolemaeus nor dishonor nor injure their common home nor consort with another man. . . .

Wherefore let the parties to the marriage live together blamelessly, observing the duties of marriage, and let the bridegroom supply his wife with all things necessary in proportion to his means.²⁵

Even in the nonliterary evidence, methodological problems remain. Epitaphs like the *Laudatio Turiae* tend to be so idealized that the phraseology becomes stereotypical.²⁶ Tomb inscriptions tend also to be upper-class and urban. Here again we face the question how to write social history from *Ozzie and Harriet*. A brilliant social historian like Rostovtzeff²⁷ can do much with archaeological remains (wall paintings, tools, instruments of torture, contents of the basement of a Pompeian villa, etc.), but artifacts are often impossible to interpret without a literary context to illuminate them, as is underscored by the case of the Etruscan materials—where the wealth of artifacts is offset by the lack of

²⁵ Marriage contracts in the papyri cited from C. C. Edgar and A. S. Hunt, *Select Papyri*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932–34).

²⁶ Richard Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1942) 290–99 *et passim*, shows that the characteristics of wifely virtue—piety, chastity, modesty, etc.—were so stereotypical that they were often simply given as abbreviations on Roman tombstones; cf. Balsdon, *Roman Women*, 206f. The possibility that the epitaph cited above of Allia Potestas, apparently a courtesan, is tongue-in-cheek would not diminish the currency of the values parodied there.

²⁷ Cited above, nn. 11–12; for the huge advances Rostovtzeff made possible in social history, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "M. I. Rostovtzeff," in *idem*, *Studies in Historiography* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson) 91ff.

Etruscan literature.²⁸ Roman legal sources come from upper-class lawmakers and thus reflect a heavy class bias. Almost the only good sources to get us down into the lower classes and out into the countryside are the papyri: these cover all classes, the rural poor and illiterate as much as well-to-do, literate urban dwellers; and they cover a tremendous range of social situations, many of them on the artless and unidealized level of day-to-day actuality: contracts, bills of sale, deeds, marriage and divorce papers, personal letters, lawsuits, petitions, administrative documents, wanted notices for runaway slaves, inventories, and shipping manifests. As Adolf Deissmann might say, the social settings of the papyri are like their language, *koine* in their essence. Thus these are very important sources, but with a caution: they are from Roman Egypt, which was a very complicated special administrative situation and not always typical of the Empire.

Methodologically, then, we must realize that ancient socio-historical evidence is like all the rest of our evidence: multiple, random, and diversified, but fragmentary and incomplete; what we have is weighted toward the wealthy urban upper classes (particularly in urban Rome and Athens²⁹), with very little to show the real day-to-day life of the rural peasantry, the urban poor, or slaves in households apart from the upper class. When we talk about the social history of the NT church, we are talking mostly about common rather than upper-class people, as at Corinth, where “Not many wise according to the flesh, not many powerful, not many wellborn” comprised the congregation.³⁰ Here we are forced to do as we must in all other areas of historical investigation: weigh all available evidence and reconstruct it hypothetically as best we may. The best hypothesis is the one that makes the best use of the most evidence, and every hypothesis is open to correction. An undervalued source is the internal evidence of the NT, which, because it does not share the usual upper-class bias of ancient literary sources, is an important document for social history.

²⁸ “[A]rchaeological data are not self-interpreting” [Oster, “Use, Misuse, and Neglect,” 53; cf. M.I. Finley, “Archaeology and History,” *Daedalus* 100 (1971) 168–86].

²⁹ Our “Greek” evidence tends to be Athenian—which confines our time frame to the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Brent Shaw, “The Age of Roman Girls at Marriage,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987) 30–46, furnishes an excellent discussion how the evidence of tomb-inscriptions is skewed toward the upper classes.

³⁰ 1 Cor. 1:26–29; cf. the situation of slave members of the congregation reflected in 1 Cor. 7:17–28; see also the social analysis of Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 69–119. The social composition of the early Pauline churches is under heavy discussion. Some writers now suggest a larger body of well-to-do members, e.g. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

3) A platform for our understanding of the household code of Ephesians will be the question how male heads of households viewed their wives, their children, and their slaves. With slaves it is unquestionable: they viewed them as property.³¹ With wives and children it is less clear. Relationships within patriarchally structured families—particularly where cross-status relationships such as concubinage or contubernity were involved—were immensely complex. Roman marriage patterns underwent an evolution during the late republican and early imperial periods. It is now fashionable to argue that from the late republic onward marriage *sine manu* was becoming the norm: that is, marriage where the wife was still *sui iuris*. Previously, it is argued, the norm had been marriage *cum manu* where the wife was transferred from the authority (*manus*) of her father to that of her husband.³² The idea is that the archaic and repressive institution of marriage *cum manu* was breaking down under pressure from a sort of ancient women's movement: "Free marriage" took the place of earlier forms, in which the wife passed into the absolute control of her husband. This view misses the essential point that marriage *cum manu* was disadvantageous to women of property. Marriage *sine manu* allowed upper-class women to retain their property rights within their father's line; marriage *cum manu* cut off those rights and transferred women into their husband's family.

The question resolves down to "chattel or person?"³³ For our purposes it is sufficient to hold that functionally most women were treated as property of their fathers or their husbands. Women were given in marriage or as concubines, or even sold into slavery, by their fathers; in classical Athens, even married daughters could be taken by their fathers and given to another, more desirable husband.³⁴ Athenian women, Roman women, Egyptian women, and Jewish women were under male guardianship—for Roman women,

³¹ Roman legal texts classify slaves as "movable property": W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908); Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987).

³² Argued, e.g., by Fritz Schulz, *Classical Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951) 103f., 142; Balsdon, *Roman Women*, 45f., 179f.; A. M. Gratwick, "Free or Not So Free? Wives and Daughters in the Late Roman Republic," in *Marriage and Property*, ed. Elizabeth M. Craik (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1984) 30–53, demolishes their view.

³³ Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); cf. Gratwick, "Free or Not So Free?" and Susan Treggiari, "Women as Property in the Roman Empire," in *Women and the Law*, ed. D. Kelly Weisberg (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1982) 2:7–33.

³⁴ Women as the Athenian father's possessions: Lefkowitz-Fant, 19; Douglas M. MacDowell, *The Law in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) 84–98; Lacey, *Family in Classical Greece*, 151–76.

lifelong guardianship.³⁵ In classical Athens widows and daughters were disposed of by testament to anyone the deceased man pleased, usually to his family.³⁶ During a woman's childbearing years, Greek, Hellenistic Egyptian, Roman, and Jewish laws carefully safeguarded the husband's interest in the children his wife produced. Wegner's brilliant book on the status of women in the Mishnah states the social reality:

I soon found that in the domain of private law the Mishnah treats all women as persons some of the time and some women as persons all the time. But then I had to reframe my question to ask when and why the sages reduced women to chattel. Thus recast, my investigation reaped dividends. I found that the Mishnah treats woman as chattel *only* when her biological function belongs to a specified man *and* the case poses a threat to his control of that function.³⁷

In other words, the compelling legal focus is the father's interest in the fruit of his wife's womb. The father "owned" his children, both after and *before* they were born. The fact that in Athens and elsewhere among the Greeks, in Rome, and in Egypt, fathers had the power to expose their children shows this.³⁸ In the fifth-century BC Gortyn Code, the exception proves the rule: where a divorced wife bears a child, if her ex-husband refuses to accept it, the power to expose it passes to her.³⁹ The same happens to the pregnant widow in Hellenistic Egypt: her husband's death frees her not only to remarry, but also to expose his posthumous child when she bears it.⁴⁰

Summarizing the key points thus far: A) Many modern discussions of women's issues rest on faulty methods and a poor understanding of ancient social history. Often they fail to approach the realities of the ancient social

³⁵ That is, marriageable women who had families. Women in less fortunate circumstances—e.g. captives, slaves, orphans and prostitutes—were treated differently.

³⁶ "As the law now stands a man may bestow his heiress on any one whom he pleases, and, if he die intestate, the privilege of giving her away descends to his heir" (Aristotle *Politics* 1254–77; cf. Aristotle's will and Demosthenes' statement—all in Lefkowitz-Fant, 65, 36f., 37f.). Similarly in Rome: Lefkowitz-Fant, 135f.

³⁷ Wegner, *Chattel or Person?* vi; cf. 5: "The Mishnah maintains strict control of women's activities, especially their sexual and reproductive role in the social economy."

³⁸ Fathers exposing their children: POxy 744 (Lefkowitz-Fant, 11), letter of Hilarion to his wife Alis: "If you bear offspring, if it is a male, let it live; if it is female, expose it." Sparta furnished a partial exception here; under Lycurgus children were viewed as the property not of individual families, but of the city-state: Lefkowitz-Fant, 77f.

³⁹ Lefkowitz-Fant, 34.

⁴⁰ Lefkowitz-Fant, 60 (PBer 1104; Alexandria, 1st century BC).

world sympathetically.⁴¹ B) If the values the NT attributes to women conform with those found in the broader body of ancient evidence, then we may use this corpus of material with greater methodological confidence in our attempt to comprehend the social dynamics of early Christianity. C) Piety, chastity, domesticity and submissiveness in the constellation of "worthy woman" values are not modern creations; they are ubiquitous in the biblical world. They should not be deconstructed as "cultural." The specific descriptions of these items will display cultural variations, but the items themselves are supercultural.⁴² D) The patriarchs of ancient households were likely to feel that they *owned* their wives, their children, and their slaves.

II. The Household Code of Ephesians 5:15–6:9 *vis-à-vis* Its Ancient Setting

Currently the household codes of the NT are most often treated as primarily intended to command wives, children, and slaves to be submissive.⁴³ This view of their purpose lends itself, perhaps subconsciously, to revisionism: on the analogy to what educated modern Western readers see as the self-evidently unjust repression of slaves, we see a similar unjust social structure designed to repress women, and it becomes self-evident to us that the structure should be changed. A common approach historicizes and deconstructs the texts on the view that NT social history is culture bound.

This model makes several mistakes in reading the household codes. It works on the questionable assumption of what we may call the "social injustice" model. It often assumes that Paul had a moral obligation to attack the injustices we see in the ancient social order and that it was a moral failure for him not to confront those structures head on—as if in its nascent form the church had the power to work such a program of social and political reform.⁴⁴

⁴¹ In the wise words of Peter Brown, "understanding is no substitute for compassion" in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) xviii.

⁴² With great deference I take some issue with my honored teacher Carroll Osburn. His classes on women in early Christianity (e.g., at the 1993 Pepperdine University lectureship) argue that our commonly accepted model of the virtuous Christian woman, whose chief characteristics are piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness, was created by 19th-century American preachers combatting an incipient women's movement. He then deconstructs this model as "pure culture and not Bible."

⁴³ "The primary interest is in the submission of wives, children, and slaves," in Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive*, 1; cf. Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 165–266; Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of I Cor. 7:21* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973).

⁴⁴ G. B. Caird, "St. Paul and Women's Liberation," *BJRL* 54 (1971) 279f., observes that the mission of the early church would have been aborted if the church had confronted the social realities of the NT world head on.

Insofar as it accepts the evaluation of the ancient world as a patriarchal conspiracy to repress women,⁴⁵ it is guilty of anachronistically retrojecting current social evaluations into its reading of texts and understanding of social conditions that were very different in the world of the NT. Its methods of gathering socio-historical material frequently are overly dependent upon literary sources which it handles selectively and anecdotally, seriously distorting its picture of the ancient world. It encourages us to assume that our application of the principles we see in the text is faithful to the true intention of the authors or of God, while we reject many specific items of their thinking.

I wish to offer an alternative model: I am convinced that the primary purpose of the household passages of the NT is *not* to repress the socially downtrodden, but to transform spiritually all who are in Christ—husbands, fathers, and masters included. This in turn transforms all their relationships. Rather than deconstructing the submission of Christian wives to their husbands, we should pay renewed attention to the construct of mutual submission and reciprocal self-sacrifice that is the major force of the household codes. My view becomes clear when one reads the texts asking how an audience in the social matrix of the Roman Empire would have heard them. What does Paul say in them that is old, and what does he say that is new? What is the same as widely-held cultural patterns, and what is different—perhaps startlingly different?

What is old are the injunctions to wives, children, and slaves to obey their husbands, fathers, and masters: these norms were probably universal and self-evidently desirable throughout the ancient world. As suggested above, each norm can be copiously illustrated from socio-historical evidence in all the host cultures of early Christianity. If the primary focus of Paul's injunctions is his charge for wives, children, and slaves to "submit [them]selves," then his ancient readers would see Paul as having nothing more than a firm grasp upon the obvious. That Paul upholds the existing social order is not primary, but secondary: it is his opening gambit, his communication bridge to his audience, which he crosses over with the new and transforming perspective of Christ.⁴⁶ In Christ each of these relationships is transformed: What is new is the perspective of Christ, which charges husbands, fathers, and slave owners also to "submit [them]selves to one another out of reverence for Christ."

⁴⁵ "Conspiracy" models: Keuls, *Reign of the Phallus*; many works of Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza and Mary Daly. John Ellis, "Feminist Theory's Wrong Turn," *Academic Questions* 7:4 (fall 1994): 42–50, addresses the assumptions this model makes.

⁴⁶ "Opening gambit" is the phrase of Robin Scroggs, "Paul and the Eschatological Woman," *JAAR* 40 (1972) 296; for Paul's communication strategy, see Henry Chadwick, "'All Things to All Men' (1 Cor. 9.22)," *NTS* 1 (1955) 261–75.

Husbands are no longer to view their wives as their possessions; rather, they are to love them as Christ loved the church and to lay down their lives for them. Christ transforms marriage into a relationship of reciprocity.⁴⁷ Fathers are no longer to view their children as their possessions, nor treat them distantly, delegating their nurture to slaves and pedagogues; rather, fathers are to involve themselves personally in training their children in the teachings of Christ.⁴⁸ Christ transforms fatherhood into a relationship of reciprocity. Masters are no longer to view their slaves as their possessions; rather, they are to view themselves as fellow slaves in Christ and to treat their slaves as Christ treats them. Christ transforms slavery into a relationship of reciprocity. All these Christian transformations of the perspective of those in power over the Roman household would have been earthshaking in the social world of the Roman *paterfamilias*.⁴⁹

Some idea of reciprocity did exist here and there—for example, in Cynic-Stoic discussions of masters and slaves, in Columella or Pliny; but the basis for it is a patronizing form of enlightened self-interest. The Christian basis, the dynamics, of reciprocity for Paul is “out of reverence for Christ.” Thoughts of reciprocity did exist in some non-Christian *Haustafeln*. Thus while it is not unique to Christianity, the transforming power of its driving force is. Paul’s prayer climaxing Ephesians 1–3 goes on to say that God is the great *paterfamilias* of every family in heaven or on earth.⁵⁰ The wealth of his power and glory makes possible such transformation—transformation far beyond all we can ask or even imagine. At the end of his “husbands and wives” section, Paul adds that in marriage this transformation is a great mystery, which apart from Christ the surrounding world will not understand, but in Christ the church will (Eph. 5:32).

This discussion might be taken to support the Christian feminist idealism of proponents of the “eschatological woman” model of Robin Scroggs and

⁴⁷ “Reciprocity” in the Christian household codes: Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, e.g., 217, 262 n. 232.

⁴⁸ Greek and Roman upper-class households customarily delegated the training of children to nurses, tutors, and pedagogues—essentially female or male “nannies.” “[T]he pedagogue, like the *nutritor* and *educator*, has . . . to be regarded as a surrogate parent, and few upper-class children can have remained immune from the formative influence he exercised upon them” [Keith Bradley, “Child Care at Rome,” *Historical Reflections* 12 (1985) 506].

⁴⁹ Among the vast literature on the Roman *paterfamilias*, see Crook, *Law and Life of Rome*, 98–114; Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 5–29; in Greek culture see Lacey, *Family in Classical Greece*, 100–18; Harrison, *Law of Athens*, 1:30ff.

⁵⁰ Elliott, *Home for the Homeless*, 194f., 202f., connects the view of God in Ephesians with the Roman *paterfamilias*, but without citing the clearest passage for it, Eph 3:14ff. NIV captures the Roman nuance: “the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.”

others.⁵¹ Not at all: that view is held by selectively reconstructing Paul, selectively citing him, and selectively interpreting the citations—for example, by removing Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastorals from consideration, by snipping out 1 Cor 14:33f. as a non-Pauline interpolation, by doing smoke-and-mirror exegesis of wifely submission in 1 Cor 11:2–16, and (not least) by failing to understand the force of the household codes within their social setting. The “eschatological woman” model makes Paul think like his triumphalist opponents at Corinth who want to dissolve marriage or practice sacral celibacy within marriage; the Corinthians have written expecting Paul to agree.⁵² Instead he cautions that most Christians cannot be expected to have the gift of celibacy. The “eschatological woman” model makes Paul set a social policy that in his setting could not fail but to mark him as subversive to the social order.⁵³ As a hypothesis, “eschatological woman” is attractive to us; but how does it fit with other members of the household code: “eschatological children”? “eschatological slaves”? We need to remind ourselves of the wisdom and delicacy Paul demonstrates in Philemon as he navigates around the dangerous question of how a Christian master should treat a runaway slave who has now become a Christian. For Paul to teach liberationism regarding slaves, Caird observes, would be “both politically dangerous and religiously misleading,” and “such a reputation could be disastrous for the church.”⁵⁴ Paul is a social realist rather than idealist, with women as with children or slaves: for him to teach about women as Scroggs and others represent him would everywhere have undermined his effectiveness in the Christian mission.

III. The Social History of Women in the NT: Should We Accept the “Social Injustice” Model?

How helpful, then, is the “social injustice” model of the position of women in the NT? We need to be ready to speak a good word for Paul and to point out mitigating factors forming the social realities of the ancient world, for example, the fact that everywhere fertility and childbearing were life-or-death issues. The abortive and immensely unpopular legislation of Augustus regarding marriage, divorce, adultery, and childbearing was not created in a

⁵¹ Scroggs, “Paul and the Eschatological Woman”; Wayne Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne,” *History of Religions* 13 (1974) 21–27; Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *There Is No Male and Female* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), among many. Cautions against using this model: Oster, “Use, Misuse, and Neglect,” 58–64; Caird, “Paul and Women’s Liberation,” 272ff., 279f.

⁵² So Caird, “Paul and Women’s Liberation,” 274.

⁵³ Instructively, in *Acts of Paul and Thecla* the Iconians attempt to burn Thecla at the stake for refusing to marry Thamyris. They see her Christian asceticism as a threat to the entire order of Iconian society.

⁵⁴ Caird, “Paul and Women’s Liberation,” 280.

vacuum: it was a desperate response to the failure of the Roman upper class to reproduce itself sufficiently for the great *familiae* to survive.⁵⁵ The underlying issue was not morality, but survival. Peter Brown observes that due to infant mortality in Rome in the Augustan period each fertile woman had to bear five children just to maintain the population level—this in a culture where tomb inscriptions establish the average age at time of death of Roman women as twenty-three years and some-odd months.⁵⁶ The hypothetical average Roman woman, in other words, was likely to die (like Cicero's daughter Tullia) of complications from childbirth. Should this grim reality be seen as a structural injustice in the social order or as a patriarchal conspiracy? Several changes had to take place to make our modern revisionist view of the place of women possible: mortality rates had to be greatly reduced both for children and for women in childbirth; divorce and property laws had to be liberalized so that women could own property independently from men (otherwise widows and divorcees were driven to remarriage or to prostitution⁵⁷); and society's organization around the extended family had to be broken up.

My view of the household codes does not have to be heard as advancing a self-serving sexism. Christian scholars will view the issue raised as legitimate: how are we to hear the social teachings of the NT? How are we to hear the word of God obediently? My analysis of Ephesians 5–6 does not make the passage come down as anti-feminist; it only shows that making it come down as feminist is a distortion motivated by vested interests. Vested-

⁵⁵ On the Augustan legislation, the *Lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinibus* and *Lex Papia Poppaea*: Leo Ferrera Raditsa, "Augustus' Legislation Concerning Marriage, Procreation, Love Affairs and Adultery," *ANRW* 2.13 (1980) 278–339; Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 127–32; Brunt, *Italian Manpower*, 558–66. Thomas Albert Jude McGinn, "Prostitution and Julio-Claudian Legislation: The Formation of Social Policy in Early Imperial Rome" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1986). Raditsa (289, 314f.) shows that the legislation focused (unsuccessfully) on increasing the numbers of the dwindling upper class.

⁵⁶ Brown, *Body and Society*, 6. On mortality rates: J. D. Durand, "Mortality Estimates from Roman Tombstone Inscriptions," *American Journal of Sociology* 65 (1959–60) 365–73; Bruce W. Frier, "Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian's Evidence," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 86 (1982) 213–51; Keith Hopkins, *Death and Renewal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 93–96.

⁵⁷ On prostitution caused by the destitution of women in the ancient world: Yair Zakovitch, "The Woman's Rights in the Biblical Law of Divorce," in *The Jewish Law Annual*, ed. Bernard Jackson (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 4:39f.; McGinn, *Prostitution and Julio-Claudian Legislation*, 246–67. For the determinative factor of property in the relationship of marriage, the family, and the status of women, see especially the introduction and conclusion of Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*; cf. Elizabeth M. Craik, "Marriage in Ancient Greece," in Craik, *Marriage and Property*, 2–29; and Gratwick, "Free or Not So Free?"

interest exegesis is being done on both sides: but what do we do with God when he disagrees with us? The passage should not be made to come down on either side: it stands above our vested interests. To hear the words of Paul fairly, honestly, and obediently, we must allow God to stand apart from our predispositions.

The NT should be read as neither repressive nor liberationist. The NT does teach the principle of the subordination of wives to husbands, of children to parents, of slaves to masters, of the flock to its shepherds, of citizens to their government, of hearers to the word of God; we need still to uphold this principle as vital to the life of Christian society. Subordination to God-ordered authority undergirds Christian social ethics. This is not the foundation on which a tyrannical patriarchy rests: it is the nurturing environment for reciprocity within the legitimate structures of healthy families and a healthy society. What happens to reciprocity when the structures are overthrown? The holy God calls us to obedience; Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and carry our crosses in loving self-sacrifice; Paul advises us to submit ourselves to every form of legitimate authority. This is by definition a call to subordination; it is only by sleight-of-hand exegesis that we can recoup Jesus, let alone Paul, for feminism.

But the NT also teaches a higher and more vital principle, that of mutual submission, of reciprocity in all our relationships: "Submit yourselves to one another. . . ." This is the word of God, to which all of us in the household of God—from social conservatives to liberationists, from the far left to the far right—are called to bow the knee. Both the Neanderthal dominating husband who beats his chest, demanding that his wife submit to him, and the modern avant-garde feminist who spends her life seeking empowerment—both stand worlds away from the will of God. Our Father calls all members of his household, not to misuse and abuse others, but to submit ourselves to one another; and he calls us not to seek empowerment, but to live out our lives in the moral and spiritual equivalent of martyrdom: to die with Christ, to lay down our lives in service to one another. We must not adopt any mind-set, any view of God, or any handling of the NT that does not bear the good fruit of loving self-giving. "Submit yourselves to one another out of reverence for Christ."



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