HAS GOD ORDAINED THE SUBORDINATION OF WIVES TO HUSBANDS?*

Herbert Schneider, SJ

S arrastro, the high priest in Mozart’s The Magic Flute, expresses the paradigm of the husband-wife relationship in conventional society from biblical times to the present. He says to Pamina: “A man must direct your hearts, because without him every woman is in danger of missing her sphere of effectiveness.” Not only are women to be under the tutelage of men, but they need to be subordinate to such direction in order to be effective as women. This paradigm has been taken for granted until recent times and can be traced back in Western society to Aristotle. It is found in secular society, as well as in the Jewish communities of the first century CE and it is also behind the texts in the New Testament and the Apostolic Church.

As the inspired word of God, the Bible is the most fundamental norm of faith and morals for Christians. The texts, however, dealing with the husband-wife relationship seem to be totally contrary to the view and understanding of contemporary women and men. Some of

these texts are found in the so-called household codes (Col 3:18-19; Eph 5:21-33; 1 Pet 3:1-7; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Titus 2:1-10; see Appendix A). In these passages, wives are exhorted to be submissive to their husbands. The household codes contain other exhortations regulating the conduct of slaves to masters, children to parents, and citizens to governmental authority.

The purpose of this paper is to lay the foundation for a fruitful discussion of the area of husband and wife relationship in the New Testament and the relevance of its teachings for the present time. I propose to do this in the following way:

1. A discussion of the specific words used for subordination, submission, and obedience.
2. A study of the individual texts against the background of the sources for these codes.
3. Finally, conclusions for possible relevance of these texts for today.

The New Testament Language of Headship and Subordination

*Please see Appendix B for the different texts.*

A verb form derivative of the root τάγις is used for the behavior of wives, slaves (in the case of 1 Pet 2:18), citizens, younger community men to elders (1 Pet 2:13 and 5:5, respectively). The verb “to obey” is used for children and slaves in Colossians and Ephesians. The analysis of the verb forms of “to subordinate oneself” below follows closely the presentation of the same in John Elliott’s commentary on 1 Peter.¹

The verb used for the behavior of wives, slaves and young men (1 Peter) is made up of ὑπό (sub or “under”) and τασσω (“order,” “place,” “station”), which in turn is a derivative of the Greek noun

for "order" (taxis, cf. tagma, "that which has been ordered"). In the New Testament, the verb occurs mostly in a context of ethical instruction. In secular Greek, it occurs less frequently and mostly with respect to political and military subjection. According to Elliott, the verb ὑποτάσσω and the middle ὑποτάσσομαι (subordinate oneself to) and the related noun ὑποταγή, (subordination) like taxis and tagma, presume a concept and standard of natural and social order prevalent throughout the Greco-Roman world. "This cosmic and social order, it was held, generated reciprocal relationships in which one or more parties occupy a superior social position and the other an inferior position."

In ethical contexts, ὑποτάσσω and ὑποταγή signify recognition and respect for authority and order, which involve submission, deference to, subjection to, and obedience to superiors, namely God and humans in position of recognized authority. It is important to note that we are here dealing with a concept of order. This is clear from the root of the Greek verb and noun. The best translation in all circumstances of the Greek ὑποτάσσω is "to subordinate" because the English word contains within it the concept of order.

What is the cultural context of these terms? We already pointed to the concept of order. Wolfgang Schrage traces it to Stoicism. He writes:

Stoicism represents a cosmic-pantheistic structure uniting God and humans, in which things and structures are hierarchically descending manifestations of the divine.... In the Hierocles fragment the fatherland is called a second god and parents are called earthly

---

2Elliott, 486.


4Elliott, 486.

5Ibid., 487.
gods, i.e., gods of the house. This gives rise to a double motivation. Children are to reverence their parents like gods and parents ought to act like gods in the discharge of their duties.⁶

Elliott lines up the reciprocal relationships of subordinate and superordinate persons (Table 1). What he says is applicable to the rest of the New Testament.

Elliott points out that in all these reciprocal relationships “a social order and stratification are presupposed.”⁷ At the head of the Roman social order was the emperor. In second place came the various ranks of Roman nobility. From these were distinguished the rest of the population, ranked in descending order as follows: the urban and rural free plebeians, freed persons, slaves, the destitute and, finally, the aliens at the very bottom of the pecking order. The household mirrored that order of the state. Beneath the male heads of the

Table 1. The reciprocal relationships of subordinate and superordinate persons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subordinate Persons</th>
<th>Superordinate Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free persons</td>
<td>Emperor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household slaves</td>
<td>Masters/owners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives</td>
<td>Their own husbands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young persons</td>
<td>Elders</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


⁷Elliott, 488.
household in their roles as husbands, fathers, and masters were subordinated the wives, children, and slaves.\(^8\)

**Secular Background**

In his book *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter*, David L. Balch presents the thinkers and writers who are behind the commonly accepted pattern of household relationships in the ancient world.\(^9\) Basing himself on Wilhelm\(^10\)—who observed that household instructions were part of three closely interrelated topics: περὶ πολιτείας, περὶ ὀικονομίας and περὶ γάμου—Balch proceeds to analyze what had been written about the three and their interrelationship. We do not want to repeat what can be found in Balch. What does interest us for our subsequent discussion are the reasons adduced for the subordination of women and other groups for the sake of order and harmony.

In the discussion of rulers and ruled, Diogenes Laertius (Middle Platonist) states: “The natural rulers are the males, not only among men, but also among the other animals, for the males everywhere exert wide-reaching rule over the females” (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* III, 91-92). Aristotle wrote that there are, by nature, classes of rulers and ruled. The free rules the slave, the male the female, and the man the child in a different way (Pol I, 1259b 22-1260 25). Balch sums up by saying that, for Aristotle, authority and subordination are necessary because the man is the most rational, the woman is less rational, the child immature and the slave irrational. The virtue of each of these classes is different and that of the

---

\(^8\)Ibid., 487.


woman is silence (1260a 31). Areius Didymus, a contemporary of Caesar Augustus echoing Aristotle’s ideas, wrote concerning the household:

The man has the rule of this house by nature, for the deliberative faculty in a woman is inferior, in children it does not yet exist, and it is completely foreign to slaves. Rational household management, which is the controlling of a house and of those things related to the house, is fitting for a man (Stob. II. 149.5 Wachsmuth). Areius makes it very clear that authority is most necessary in a household and that men—not women, children or slaves—have the authority.

Philo of Alexandria seems to have drawn his ideas about the relationship of men and women, parents and children, masters and slaves, not so much from the Bible, but from philosophers indebted to Plato and Aristotle. In Against Apion, Philo wrote: “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” (II. 199. Trans. Thackeray). This is quoted by Balch together with another text from Josephus: “Wives must be in servitude to their husbands, a servitude not imposed by violent ill-treatment but promoting obedience in all things” (Apology for the Jews 7.3 and 5. Trans. Colson). These Jewish writers assimilated Aristotle’s ideas on the order of household relationships via hellenistic rhetoric to such an extent that they confused it with the teaching of the Torah. According to Balch, both thought that Plato had read and copied Moses. What really happened was that Josephus and Philo were reading Aristotle and/or Plato back into the Bible.

11Balch, 35.
12Ibid., 41.
13Ibid., 45.
14Ibid., 54.
15Ibid., 55.
Finally, some examples from Neopythagorean philosophers will round out this section. Callicratidas wrote that the husband governs but the wife is governed (On the Happiness of Households, 105.8–9). He further explains that he governs her with political power, “according to which both the governor and the thing governed establish [as their end] the common advantage” (Ibid., 106).¹⁶

The New Testament household codes—with their three pairs of reciprocal relationships, their stress on subordination of the inferior member of each pair—do exist outside Christianity and Judaism. These ideas go back to the classical Greek discussion of the constitution in which the “city” and the “house” were hierarchically ordered. Plato stressed that there must be a ruler and those ruled, and that the stronger rules the weaker. Aristotle also discusses these three pairs of relationships, i.e., husband-wife, parents-children and master-slaves. In these relationships, authority and subordination are not only central but also according to nature. Freedom and democracy on the part of wives or slaves are detrimental to the constitution and the happiness of the state. The ruling of husbands by wives leads to a dissolve and luxurious life in the state, which corrupts it. These ideas are handed on and become common place in the first century BCE and CE. They are known by thinkers and writers of the West and East of the Roman Empire. These ideas “infiltrate” Philo and Josephus and are known to the New Testament authors.¹⁷

The above texts will help us to see more clearly how the authors of the New Testament related to the general ethical conduct accepted by society at large contained in the writings on household management. These treatments on household management are today widely accepted as the background for the New Testament household codes.¹⁸

---

¹⁶Ibid., 57.
¹⁷Ibid., 61-62.
¹⁸Elliott, 505, 553.
The Husband-Wife Relationship in Colossians, Ephesians and 1 Peter

We are now ready to investigate the New Testament texts in question against the background of the secular teachings on household management and household relations. We want to ask ourselves whether anything changed when the early Church tried to come to grips with accepted household relations and behavior.

Col 3:18-19

Wives, be subordinated to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and never treat them harshly.

According to Angela Standhartinger, the household code in Col 3:18-4:1 is the earliest of the codes found in the New Testament. She attempts to show, with the help of the word ἴσος of Col 4:1, that Colossians wants to abolish all inequality. Thus, husband and wife are to treat one another as equals because together they serve Christ. This attempt to get around the subordination of wives is not convincing. Others, like Winsome Munro and Ernst Best consider the Code a later interpolation. However, Col 3:18-19 seems to be closest to the prevailing instruction of secular contemporary household management with these differences. Neither in Colossians nor in any of the other instances do we meet the language of ruler and ruled, or governor and governed, applied to the relationship of husband and wife. Another point deserves mentioning. In none of the texts are the husbands told to subject their wives but wives are strongly encouraged to subordinate themselves. It is something they


20Standhartinger, 128-29.

have to choose and take on and make their own. E. Kähler, in *Die Frau in den paulinischen Briefen*,\(^{22}\) stresses the voluntary nature of the subordination and that it does not denote blind obedience.\(^{23}\) In the letter to Aristeas, an intertestamental Jewish work from the second/first century BCE, the word is used in a positive sense for a humble, humanly accommodating and, therefore, God-pleasing demeanor.\(^{24}\)

More important is the fact that husbands are exhorted to love (ἀγαπάτε) their wives. Barth and Blanke stress that “to love” here must be understood in the context of the ethical instruction that immediately precedes the household code (cf. Col 3:17 and 3:14). We have here a teaching similar to Eph 5:21—that Christians ought to subordinate themselves to one another. This is then exemplified by the subordination of the wife to the husband and the husband’s love that is ready to give up life for the sake of the wife.\(^{25}\) The authors sum up the intention of Col 3:18-19 as follows:

That means, then, that these declarations of the Haustafel of Col assign the final word in the relationship between husband and wife not to the patriarchate but also not to the matriarchate. The concern is then not only the abolition of power of the husband in favor of the wife, and thus not about concessions through which the wife “may” participate in the power of the husband, but also the abolition of structures of dominion in the relationship between the sexes. There is no striving for equality in the sense of equal plenitude of power, but rather an equality based on loving and serving one another.\(^{26}\)

---


\(^{24}\)Barth and Blanke, 433.

\(^{25}\)Ibid., 437-38.

\(^{26}\)Ibid.
Eph 5:21-33

Be subordinate (ὑποτασσόμενο) to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives [be subordinate] to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subordinated (ὑποτάσσεται) to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything to their husbands.

Husbands love (ἀγαπᾶτε) your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.

As in Col 3:18-19, wives are exhorted to respect and be subordinate to their husbands, and husbands in turn are exhorted to love their wives. Ephesians, however, goes far beyond Colossians in giving reasons and motivation for the conduct of wives and husbands.

It is striking that the exhortation begins with a call to be subordinated to one another. In the household codes—secular, Jewish or Christian—subordination is usually restricted to certain groups: individual Christians to the state (Rom 13:1,5; 1 Pet 2:13; Titus 3:1). The idea of mutual subordination is expressed in the New Testament without the word ὑποτάσσω being used, for example in Rom 12:16; Phil 2:3; Gal 6:2; 1 Pet 5:5b.

1 Pet 5:5b reads: “Clothe yourselves with humility in your relations with one another” (cf. also Eph 4:2). Subordination in this sense
becomes the all-inclusive expression for Christian community relationships.\(^{27}\)

The author of Ephesians then proceeds to explain how this mutual subordination of all community members is to be lived out by wives and husbands. For the wives, the verb is understood in v. 22 from v. 21, and in v. 24b from v. 24a. The husband’s “subordination” to the wife is expressed by Christ-like love.\(^{28}\) We need to pay special attention to the love the husbands are called to in order to understand the meaning of the subordination of the wives in the context of this passage, since the wives’ subordination is a response to the love of the husbands.

The husband’s love toward their wives is to imitate the love of Christ for the Church. These are the qualities of Christ’s love for the Church:

1. He sacrificed his life for her (5:25).
2. Christ’s purpose is to make the church holy (5:26), and radiantly beautiful (5:27).

Husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies. The background is the concept of the Church being the body of Christ. The wife is the “body” of the husband, a second “I,” so to speak. They are one flesh as the Genesis citation in 5:31 shows. The author of Ephesians tries to drive home the total way husbands ought to care for their wives.\(^{29}\) By contrast, Plutarch wrote: “A husband is to rule his wife not like a master his possessions, but as the soul rules the body, with empathy and good sense to further unity.”\(^{30}\)


\(^{29}\)Schnackenburg, 258.

\(^{30}\)Dibelius and Greeven, 95.
uses "to rule" in his instruction, Ephesians calls for Christ-like, sacrificial love.

With the above as background, we are now in a position to determine the meaning of the call to subordination for wives. Although Ephesians stays within the culture, in which women were to be subordinated to their husbands, the author has filled the word with new meaning. Subordination in Ephesians calls wives to open themselves to the love of their husbands. They are called to allow their husbands to love and serve them as Christ loves the Church, and receive through this love the very love of Christ. This idea is stressed by Stephen Francis Miletic in his book "One Flesh." Miletic stresses the fact that ὑποτάσσω is close in meaning to ἀγαπάω. He quotes Delling (TDNT 8, 45): "It demands readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of others, i.e., ἀγάπη, and to give precedence to others."

The wife must be totally subordinate—that is, she must completely accept—the husband's Christ-like love and gift of self. The husband must love his wife completely, even to the point of his death. Both roles are christological, both roles demand total self-renunciation and both roles contribute to the soteriological process, manifesting the "one flesh" unity of Christ and the church, the New Adam and Eve of the New Creation.

For Miletic, the author of Ephesians thinks within an androcentric frame of reference, but he changes its orientation by changing the meaning of subordination and headship language. Ephesians rejects its potential for domination, especially within husband and wife relationships. The husband's role is linked to Christ's love which, by definition, excludes every element of domination of others. Although

---

32Ibid., 111.
33Ibid.
34Ibid., 116.
the patriarchal structure remains intact, the wife is subordinated to the husband; the focus is on the well-being of the wife.

According to Eph 5:22-25, subordination is not simply obedience to a despot, nor is it something the wife does by coercion, at the behest of cultural traditions in step with social stereotypes. Her subordination or willingness to accept the husband’s agapic love “in everything” (5:24) indicates that she accepts her husband’s love as a gift from God.35

The author of Ephesians has, as it were, dislodged androcentric marriage from its powerbase of domination and relocated it in the sphere of discipleship. A lifestyle of being filled with the Holy Spirit is the new foundation of power, which frees wife and husband “from the dehumanizing power struggle of the ‘ruler/ruled’ and ‘stronger/weaker’ patriarchal and androcentric social dynamics.”36 According to Miletic, spouses no longer need to struggle to dominate or to avoid being dominated. Through subordination and headship and living for the wellbeing of the other, both enter into a realm of freedom. Christ-like love empowers the husband to live for the wife’s well-being at the cost of personal desire and preference. The wife’s subordination receives the husband’s empowered act of selfless love with joy, as a gift from God.37 Schnackenburg seems to agree with the above. Subordination of the wife under her husband as head has to be seen in the light of mutual subordination out of reverence for Christ (5:21).38 Eph 5:21-33 wants the marriage partners to gift each other with love in the full meaning of ἀγάπη.39

35Ibid., 117.
36Ibid., 120.
37Ibid.
38Schnackenburg, 263.
39Ibid.